

Faith and Football in Seattle

The newly crowned NFC Champion Seattle Seahawks are the second-youngest team ever to play in the Super Bowl. They are competitive. They are confident. They are all in. The organization's values headline their walls. And for some Seahawk teammates and coaches, an impassioned belief is branded in their hearts.

"We're not just Seahawk players. We're not just football players. We're here for much more than that, Pro Bowl offensive tackle Russell Okung says. "We're followers of Christ and it's important for people to know this about us."

Rocky Seto is the Seahawks defensive passing game coordinator, "No matter what happens in this game coming up, it'll be nice—you know you wake up happy if you win, you wake up kind of disappointed if you lose, but ultimately you're still the same. Jesus changes us forever. Jesus is the greatest treasure of all!"

Karl Payne has been the Seattle Seahawks chaplain for 20 years. He's at the 30-yard sideline on game days. During the week he meets with team members and is a full-time pastor at a local Seattle Church.

He says, "There's too much of an image that if you love Jesus you're soft. And our players are far from soft, and our team is far from soft, but we have a core of people that love Jesus dearly."

Regardless of a player's chapel attendance, Payne commonly serves as confidant and inspiration.

Seahawks safety Kam Chancellor says, "It's good to know a guy like Karl, he keeps me going, he keeps pushing me and he just motivates me every week."

NFL players, coaches and staff work in a unique profession. As chaplain, Payne is player-appointed, required to give discreet, pastoral care.

Payne says, "Encourager, trainer. Somebody who tries to give the players tools they can work with. There to serve them. When you're dealing with athletes they assume everyone is trying to use them. If you do not develop trust you will not work with athletes. It's everything."

This season, Payne has watched players mature deeply in their faith, several who are team leaders and many who have become outspoken in their convictions.

"They have been willing to stick their neck out from the get go. They want to be at Bible study whether people approve or disapprove, like it, don't like it, convenient, not convenient. Sticking their name out, their reputation out, saying, 'We're gonna do this to let people know this is a platform God has given us. We're going to use it for His glory,' " says Payne.

This weekend is football's biggest game and the stage has expanded dramatically.

Seto believes it's about, "being missional, looking for constant opportunities to tell people about Jesus. That's really what it's about. The hope of our team, the brothers on the team, you know we want to do well so that ultimately we have a platform to talk about Jesus. And really that's the best thing we could do for anybody."

Payne says, "We want to win, we'll play to win. This is about a platform to 130, 140 million people whose church on Sunday is in the NFL watching the game and if we have a chance to become their church, even if it's opportunity for them to go, there are guys on both teams that love Jesus. That's a message we want people to hear."

The platform comes with a captive audience. In Seattle the raucous 12th man has been there all season long. So a handful of players and coaches wanted to craft their own message letting fans know what they believe and why. They paid for and participated in a DVD production—called, of all things, *Making of a Champion*. Turns out, that championship title is now well within reach.

Seahawks long-snapper Clint Gresham says, “It started filming in training camp, um obviously we didn’t know at that time the kind of season what we were going to have now but I think its pretty cool the way its worked out.”

Gresham pitched the idea to teammates after hearing that a Brazilian soccer player passed out a DVD of his Christian testimony at the World Cup. The Seahawks *Making of a Champion* was distributed after a home game last October and has since moved to the Web and gone viral.

Payne explains, “Clint Gresham approached me and asked ‘Why couldn’t we get some of the Christian guys on our team to ... help people understand here’s who we are as players, but here’s what motivates us as people ... we are not football players, who happen to be Christians. We are Christians, who happen to be NFL football players.’ ”

Gresham says, “We wanted to use the platform God’s given us to share our faith. You know everyone worships this god called the NFL and we wanted to introduce them to the real King.”

Okung agrees, “its just us using our avenue, where we’re at to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ.”

An avenue runs from 12 Seahawks Way, leading to the heart of their city and beyond. For quarterback Russell Wilson it’s a road that’s paved with purpose.

“In terms of my faith I believe I’m here for a reason. That’s what I told the guys, I believe we’re in the NFC Championship

for a reason. I believe God placed me in this city for a reason. That never wavers for me, I'm going to trust that the Lord's put me here. And I'm excited about the game. I'm excited about the moment. And hopefully it's the best 60 minutes of my life", says Wilson.

Okung says, "Now we're in the Super Bowl. This is a dream for me as a child. And to be living it there's no better opportunity then there is now. God had every day planned out for you. And that He knew every struggle, every pain, He knew the things you love most. And in that He set a purpose specifically for you. Its so refreshing to know that and that God is on your side."

In Seattle, they're redefining what makes a champion.

Payne concludes, "They understand the eternal perspective has to trump things of time. Three-point-four is an average NFL career. The walk with Christ is going to last a lot longer than the other. When the tinsel and confetti are done its just me and Jesus. The price of your soul was the death of the Lord Jesus. if the price is the same then the value is the same. They're locked on that. They understand that in the context of winning and losing. I am valuable because I belong to Christ. End of story."

Click below to watch *Making of a Champion*.