

On the Winning Team

NFL superstar Napoleon Kaufman traded in his Oakland Raiders jersey in 2001 and became a pastor. And he has never looked back.

No one, it seemed, could outrun Napoleon Kaufman.

There was a time just a few years ago when the former Oakland Raiders running back outpaced the NFL's finest. But there was One who chased the young football star until he could run no more. Jesus led the charge that transformed Kaufman's life.

Today, 33-year-old Kaufman pastors a growing church in the San Francisco Bay Area. "I wouldn't trade this for anything," the ex-Raiders star turned preacher told Charisma.

"Pastoring this church is the most gratifying thing I've ever done."

As a boy, he knew nothing about the Bible or church. Kaufman grew up with his mother and grandparents after his parents split when he was an infant. He had his dad's unusual name—Napoleon—but did not know the presence of his father. His mother found it hard to make ends meet.

Growing up in Lompoc, near Santa Barbara, California, Kaufman had a flair for sports. Playing football, he says, became a way to flush frustration out of his system. His speed and skill on the field soon became obvious. It was a talent that would earn him a full scholarship to the University of Washington.

During the early 1990s, Kaufman played in two Rose Bowls with the Washington Huskies and is still talked about as one of the university's all-time greats. After turning pro, he had several memorable seasons wearing the Raiders' famed silver and black. He holds Oakland's single-game rushing record of 227 yards and is fourth on the Raiders' all-time rushing list with 4,792 yards on 978 carries.

Kaufman was at the top of his game. Then suddenly, at age 28, he quit.

Few people have heard the remarkable story behind his decision—how God grabbed hold of a young man at the peak of his privileged career and used his life.

Heaven's Draft Pick

Kaufman's spiritual awakening began during his college football days. He had acquired fame, money and hero status—"living every young guy's dream," he says—yet still there was a hollow ring to life.

"I remember sitting at my house in Seattle and thinking: Is this it? Is this everything I've been striving for?" he recalls. "I don't know quite how to put it into words, but I felt very strongly that God was pursuing me."

It took several years, though, for Kaufman to respond to the tug of God.

Rushing forward to 1996, Kaufman had just completed his first season with the Raiders. Then 23 years old, he was driving to a training session when he felt overwhelmed by God's presence. Shaken, he pulled over and tears began to flow. When he

arrived at the training field, Kaufman tried to shrug off the experience.

"I was doing my usual thing, acting crazy and cussing. Then, one of my teammates turned to me and said: 'You know, Napoleon, you don't look like the type of guy who'd be cussing like that. ... Don't you know God can use your life?'"

Says Kaufman: "When I was alone later, all I could hear were those words, 'Don't you know God can use your life?' I knelt down and gave my life to Jesus.

"From that moment, it was like I was overtaken by the presence of God. I had this overwhelming sense that God was after me and there was something He wanted me to do."

God had brought one of the NFL's swiftest running backs to his knees. And Kaufman changed radically overnight. The NFL became an arena to share his newfound faith.

"I was very vocal. ... I talked about Jesus all the time in the locker room," he recalls. "If a guy came in cussing and bragging about how many women he'd slept with, I would challenge him and confront him with it.

"Sometimes they'd see my light and try to put it out. Other times they would listen. Sometimes it seemed like they weren't paying any attention to what I had to say, but later some of the guys would come up to me and say, 'Napoleon, I've given my life to the Lord.'"

As time went on, the conviction welled within Kaufman that God

had a special assignment for him. He prayed earnestly for God's leading and in 2001 informed the Raiders he was hanging up his No. 26 jersey for good to focus on his teaching ministry, Crucified With Christ. For the next year, he traveled around the country, sharing his testimony and exhorting church leaders to be sold out for Jesus.

That was just the beginning. Soon afterward, God gave Kaufman a vision for a church that would be a "well" of His love, a church that would welcome the Holy Spirit and be grounded in the Word, a church that would embrace people of all races and walks of life.

Playing in a New League

The Well Christian Community was launched in 2003 in Dublin, California, by only 15 founding members. At the first service, more than 120 people showed up and there weren't enough seats. In three years, The Well grew to 600 regular attendees, with an emphasis on Spirit-led worship, sound biblical teaching and multicultural expression.

Some people are drawn to the church by his celebrity status, Kaufman acknowledges. "But if they're not serious about meeting with God, they don't stay long," he told Charisma. "This church is not about me. It's about Jesus ... about being broken at the altar before Him. To everyone here, I am Pastor Napoleon—not Napoleon the football star."

Other professional athletes, including several ex-Raiders, attend The Well, but Kaufman says that "credentials are checked in at the door."

“To be honest, there are people in our church who don’t know I used to play pro football,” he continues. “They don’t know and probably don’t care. They just know Jesus is here.”

The father of four—married to Nicole, his wife of 10 years, who co-pastors The Well alongside him—ponders on what he describes as an “apostolic anointing” from God.

“I always knew I was not ‘an athlete who just happened to be a Christian’ but that I was ‘a Christian who just happened to be an athlete,’” he says. “My pro football days are not my ministry platform. God has placed a word in my mouth and a calling on me to preach His Word, not just go around sharing my testimony.

“I’m not building my ministry on football. That’s not what it’s all about. This is about Jesus.”

The Well is a feeding ground for hungry souls across the socioeconomic spectrum, from CEOs to those on welfare. The congregation is a mix of blacks, whites, Asian Americans and other ethnicities—reflecting the leadership’s vision of “a multicultural expression and a house of prayer.”

Kaufman says he feels God’s presence closer than ever.

“When I made the decision to retire from the Raiders, it’s as if He met me right there and said, ‘Let’s go!’”

The growing church and its pastor are attracting plenty of attention in the Bay Area, broadcasting weekly TV programs The Hope of Glory and Times of Refreshing. The shows are taped at

the church facility located in a Dublin business park—an unspectacular building that at first glance from the outside could be mistaken for an insurance office.

When the church outgrew the original facility, the solution was to knock through a wall so The Well could spill into the adjoining building—now the sanctuary. As its pastor did on the football field, The Well makes the most of every yard of space. One Sunday the church welcomed 39 new members and announced an offshoot church plant in Reno, Nevada.

“Our church is not perfect,” Kaufman says. “But one thing I guarantee—we are people who are hungry for God and everything we do centers on Jesus.”

Building a Winning Team

The Well aims to create an atmosphere in which the Holy Spirit can work in people’s lives, deliver people from addictions and patterns of sin, and fill them with love for others.

Says Kaufman: “There are churches that are wide [growing numerically] but not deep [spiritually mature], and churches that are deep but not wide. We want depth and width—personal intimacy with God and strong relationships with one another.”

He has a word of caution for those who have dropped out of church and think they can go it alone.

“Jesus is building something that has structure,” he says. “Christ likens His church to a house and to a body, so there is a structural element to Christianity that cannot be denied.

The Word gives us the blueprint.

“I think both corporate church and home groups are necessary, but there’s something about meeting together in church that cannot be compensated for. One of the major weapons of the devil is to isolate us and foster disillusionment.”

The Well does not practice a theatrical version of Christianity—and Kaufman does not see himself as a showman.

“I consider myself a facilitator whose job is to create the right atmosphere for God to show up and show off,” Kaufman says. “So, if anyone is going to put on a show, it’s not going to be me.”

“There needs to be order and decency in church,” he continues. “When people are throwing themselves on the floor and all over the place, that is not order; that’s confusion. We don’t want to be legalistic, but we don’t want to be lawless, either. We believe the Holy Spirit comes with order.

“I know people who’ve been in crazy services that have left a bad taste in their mouths. People need to feel safe in church, not exposed to craziness. In some cases, people say, ‘God is moving,’ but it’s not God at all. ... It is lawlessness.”

The former crowd-pleaser says he has learned as a pastor he must resist pressure to be a compromising people-pleaser.

“One of the major errors we are making in the church in America today is that too much is being done to gain the approval of man,” he says. “We are making a major mistake if

we continue to focus on man's satisfaction and fulfilling man's desires. It should be about getting God's applause and His approval.

"The church at large has become more man-centered than Christ-centered. We have a 'democratic mind-set' in many of our churches—that is, 'I count and my opinion matters.' That kind of mind-set robs Christ of His place."

Pandering to people, Kaufman says, risks extinguishing the flame of the Spirit.

"A lot of church leaders are afraid of upsetting people," he observes. "It is the fear of man, and it must be overcome."

He is also convinced that America's churches need to reverse the trend toward bigger programs and elaborate facilities.

"The church in the U.S. generally tends to think it's in better condition than it really is," he says. "People think if they've got a nice building, nice facilities, then they're set. So often, we glory in what we have instead of Who we have."

The Well is so intent on pursuing God that its leaders fast each week, believing that to deny oneself expresses dependence on God. As a result, Kaufman says, they are seeing broken marriages restored and people released from sexual immorality and delivered from demonic influences.

They believe in exercising the gifts of the Spirit but not at the expense of helping Christians mature in the Word of God. It's a pattern Kaufman calls "balance of Word and Spirit." His church, he says, does not shrink from confronting spiritual

forces, such as those that drive San Francisco's homosexual activity.

"For so long, the Bay Area has been considered a spiritual graveyard, overcome by the powers of darkness," Kaufman says. "It's true there's a lot of demonic activity here, and it's a stronghold of immorality and perversion. But I want the world to know there are churches here contending for the kingdom of God and we need your prayers."

Kaufman believes breakthroughs will come as Christians model humility and servanthood.

"While I was playing for the Raiders, God told me: 'You've learned how to be first. ... Now I am going to teach you how to be second,'" Kaufman recalls. Weeks later, Tyrone Wheatley took over his starting position on the team.

"I learned that it wasn't about me," Kaufman says, "that I could cheer on Tyrone from the sidelines. God taught me the importance of preferring others above myself ... to celebrate when someone else scores a touchdown, or when someone else is leading worship."

Now he's more comfortable with a Bible in his hands than a football—more at home before his congregation than in front of a crowded stadium.

Napoleon Kaufman, the NFL running back who wowed the crowds, is running the race of faith—cheered on by a different crowd, a cloud of heavenly witnesses.

Julian Lukins is a native of England now living in Sequim, Washington. A frequent contributor to Charisma, he believes cricket, not American football, will be heaven's sport.