

ENDORSEMENTS

“I have appreciated my friendship with David Akers, and I am so grateful that he is unashamed of his love for Jesus. He has been an outspoken and consistent testimony of the gospel through times of glory and trials. I love that about him.”

Francis Chan, PASTOR & SPEAKER

AUTHOR, *Crazy Love: Overwhelmed by a Relentless God and Erasing Hell*

“David Akers and I were teammates for most of my thirteen years as a safety with the Philadelphia Eagles. And when it comes to his faith in God, David is the real deal. His faith increased over the years as he came to understand that God’s love is bigger than our feelings. That His love, coupled with our faith, is limitless! No matter what is put in our paths! David lived out his faith on the field, in the locker room, and in every other part of his life. When David says something, it speaks volumes because his life backs it up.”

Brian Dawkins, NINE-TIME PRO-BOWL SAFETY

Philadelphia Eagles and Denver Broncos

“David Akers is an unusual human being. I heard about his Christian testimony before I became Chaplain of the Philadelphia Eagles several years ago. All that I heard about him—as impressive as it was—did not begin to explain his commitment to Kingdom work. David exceeded all of my expectations. He never missed a chapel service. He never missed an opportunity to share his faith in the presence of hundreds or in the presence of one individual. I was able to witness the power of his testimony, firsthand. It made a difference, not only in the lives of players on the Philadelphia Eagles football team, but also the Eagles’ administration. I was honored not only to serve him as Chaplain of the Philadelphia Eagles, but more important to me, to be called his friend.

His book will not only be a blessing to football fans, it will be a blessing to all.”

Rev., Dr. H.H. Lusk II, PASTOR, GREATER EXODUS BAPTIST CHURCH, PHILADELPHIA, PA

FOUNDER AND CEO, *People for People, Inc. and Stand for Africa*

TEAM CHAPLAIN, *Philadelphia Eagles*

“I’ve known David for years now, and his passion for the Lord is a huge encouragement to me. He doesn’t do things half-hearted, and I love the way he keeps going deeper in his faith and allows God to keep shining through him.”

Jeremy Camp, SOLO ARTIST AND SONGWRITER

Five-Time Dove Award Winner & Grammy Nominee

“I had the privilege of being David’s team Chaplain for one season in Detroit. From the first day he walked in our locker room, he made an impact for the kingdom of God. He walks the talk and exudes a firm and contagious faith in Jesus. I have seen many players come and go in my thirty years as Chaplain, and I can honestly say that David is as solid a Christian and evangelist as any I’ve mentored. [His teammates] like him—a lot—and that’s not always easy for a kicker to accomplish.... His impact outside the locker room was very strong as well. He earned great respect in the community and has a love for people that is easily seen. He cares about the poorest of the poor. He preaches with power and is grounded in God’s Word. I am a better man for having David in Detroit for the short time he played for the Lions.”

David Wilson, LEAD PASTOR, KENSINGTON CHURCH, KENSINGTON, MI
Team Chaplain, Detroit Lions

“Yes, David Akers can kick a football. He’s one of the best in history, actually. But there’s more to David than you’ll ever see on any given Sunday. He’s been a pillar in his community, an elder in his church, an involved father, and a loyal friend. He’s been through his share of highs and lows, which as a sports hero, gives him the unique ability to relate to just about anybody. And he’s never too proud to talk about his challenges in life; in fact he’s pretty good at it. David has taken some of the most taxing times in his life in stride—and used them as positives. And we’re not just talking about a few lost games here and there. David has overcome all kinds of adversities, and he has emerged as a true hero. David’s a Kentucky boy who’s come a long way, and he has plenty of amazing stories to tell from his journey.”

Brandon Heath, SOLO ARTIST AND SONGWRITER
Five-Time Dove Award Winner & Grammy Nominee

“David has been trusted by God to have a position in life that very few people will ever have. But what sets David apart from most professional athletes is that, instead of using those things for himself, he’s leveraged it to benefit others—many of whom could never pay him back. This book will not only encourage your faith but will hopefully spur you on toward love and good deeds!”

Christian Huang, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
San Francisco City Impact

WINNING IN SPITE OF

How to Turn Hard Times Into
Personal Growth, Renewed Purpose,
and Increased Influence

DAVID
AKERS

WITH Mark Vermillion



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To all of my football teammates who over the years have contributed to my success as a player. And to all of my life teammates who've contributed to my development as a husband, father, friend, businessman, and Christ-follower.

I owe you a debt of gratitude.

*To my children, Luke, Halley, and Sawyer.
I thank God each and every day for the opportunity
to be your dad. You have blessed me
beyond measure, and I am proud that Jesus
is in the center of your lives.*

*And to my closest teammate of all, my wife, Erika.
Your name is on many of the pages in this book because
you have contributed most to every aspect of my life.*

I owe you the greatest debt of gratitude.

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INTRODUCTION

Winning Redefined

[What I've Learned About Winning and Losing]

“You were born to be a player. You were meant to be here. This moment is yours.”

- HERB BROOKS -

“You and I are the players, God’s our head coach, and we’re all playing the biggest game of all.”

- JOE GIBBS -

God blessed me with a long and eventful NFL career. In fifteen years as a placekicker, I had the opportunity to play with some great teams, for some terrific coaches, and in some big games.

I played my first twelve seasons (1999-2010) for Andy Reid and the Philadelphia Eagles, the next two seasons (2011-12) for Jim Harbaugh and the San Francisco 49ers, and my final year (2013) for Jim Schwartz and the Detroit Lions. In those fifteen seasons, my teams made the playoffs ten times and reached the NFC Championship game seven times.

And I played twice in the NFL's pinnacle game—the Super Bowl.

My first Super Bowl appearance was in my fifth season (2004), when I played for the Eagles. We lost the game to the New England Patriots, 24-21. We jumped out into a lead in the first half but couldn't hold on to it in the second. It was one of those rare Super Bowl games that was competitive and exciting. Even though my team lost, I'll never forget my first super-hyped Super Bowl experience.

My second time in the Super Bowl was near the end of my career in 2012, when I played for the 49ers. My team lost that one, too—a 34-31 heartbreaker to John Harbaugh's Baltimore Ravens. The Ravens jumped out to a 28-6 lead on us by halftime. I scored our only points in the first half.

And then the lights went out. Literally.

With 13:22 left in the third quarter, the power went out around the New Orleans Superdome, and the players stood around in the dark for thirty-four minutes until the power and lights came back on. I think all of us—players, coaches, NFL officials, city officials, the electric company, the media, and fans—were in a state of shock.

If you were watching, you probably couldn't believe it either. Once the novelty of the blackout wore off, it didn't make for very good television. But it turned out to be a blessing in disguise for my 49ers, because it changed the momentum of the game.

We came back and had a chance to win it at the end. We were down by five with less than a minute to go, and we had the ball inside our five yard line. Sadly, we couldn't punch it into the end zone in three tries, and we turned the ball over on fourth down.

And that was it. The Ravens then took an intentional safety and left us with no more time to score.

Although I made all of my kicks in that Super Bowl, it was a hard loss for everyone on our team—not to mention our fans.

Few other kickers have had the chance to play in so many big post-season games, and I'm really thankful for those opportunities to experience professional sports at its highest level.

In addition to team accomplishments, I also had some personal bright spots interspersed throughout my career. Six times I was selected to play in the Pro Bowl, the NFL all-star game, which used to be played in Hawaii the week after the Super Bowl. Only one other kicker has played in more Pro Bowls.

In 2012, I tied the record for the longest field goal in NFL history when I kicked a sixty-three yarder at Lambeau Field in Green Bay. It was a line-drive kick that thumped off the bottom cross bar and bounced through the uprights. Of course, I called the bank shot so it still counted! (In case you missed it, that was a joke. A bad one, right?)

At that time, I shared the record with Tom Dempsey (New Orleans), Jason Elam (Denver), and Sebastian Janikowski (Oakland). For a short time, that feat even got my name in the Guinness Book of World Records. My kids loved that!

But as they say, records are made to be broken. Just fourteen months later (in December 2013), Matt Prater broke the field goal distance record by kicking a sixty-four yarder in Denver.

But c'mon. He kicked it in Denver!

So, I jokingly put my own asterisk next to Prater's kick. Dempsey and I are still the only ones who've made our record kicks outside

of Denver—without the mile-high altitude and rarified air that allows the ball to travel farther. I figure that’s something, right?

In 2010, the NFL named me to its All-Decade Team for the 2000s (the years 2000-2009). Colts’ kicker Adam Vinatieri was named as the AFC kicker of the decade, and I was named as the NFC kicker of the decade. It was an incredible honor to be on the All-Decade Team with the likes of Peyton Manning, Tom Brady, Ray Lewis, and others who are considered among the greatest players of all time. Many of those players are still my good friends.

As you can see, I’ve had a lot to be thankful for in my time with the NFL.

The Rest of the Story

But my NFL story doesn’t stop at personal accolades and championship games. For every high point in my career, it seemed like there was a low point to offset it. Like everybody else, I’ve had periods of suffering, seasons of pain, and times of professional failure—on and off the field.

Off the field, my family and I have gone through financial loss, health issues, miscarriages, and struggles with depression. (You’ll read more about these in the chapters ahead.)

And on the field, I missed some big kicks. Although I made four hundred and seventy-seven kicks in my career, I also missed ninety-one.

And a few of them were really big misses!

But the hardship and failure went beyond missed kicks. At the beginning of my career, I got a shot to play for three different NFL teams, and I was released by all of them before I finally made it with the Philadelphia Eagles. I nearly gave up before my career began!

And even though I played in lots of big games throughout my career, I was on the losing side of most of them. The teams I played for lost in both Super Bowls; lost in five of my seven NFC

championship games; and lost in five of the seven Pro Bowls.

Translation: My big-game winning percentage is not very good.

Late in my career, at age thirty-eight, and after coming off the worst statistical year of my career, I had to search for a new team. At the time, I thought my career was over.

Like every other person I know, my life and career have had both good and bad times. Some of the good times were really good. And some of the bad times were really bad. And you know what? Looking back, I'm thankful to God for both the good and the bad.

Looking Back

In 2014, I officially retired from the NFL, and since then, I've had more time to reflect on my career. This book is the result. It contains lots of stories from my NFL experiences. But it's about much more than that. It focuses more on what I've learned along the way—about life, about God, about family, about work, about purpose, and ultimately, about what it means to be a winner.

My career as an NFL placekicker is central to the book—and my stories will give you a glimpse of what it's like to be a professional football player. But the principles in it are more about life itself. These principles come straight from God's Word, so they apply to every part of life.

And they don't just apply to me; they apply to your life, too. Your work. Your family. Your relationship with God. And your sense of purpose.

We're all human, and we've all experienced good times and bad. We all know what it's like to succeed, and we all know what it's like to fail. In the NFL, our failures are seen on national TV in front of millions of people. You've probably not failed in front of that many people, but I'm guessing you've fallen flat on your face in front of others a time or two.

Your circumstances are different than mine. And you've experienced pain I'll never fully understand. I don't know about you, but I sometimes compare my circumstances to others. That's a dumb thing to do. There will always be others who have it easier than us, and there will always be others

who have it worse.

In reality, your suffering is hard for you, and my suffering is hard for me. It doesn't matter whose suffering is worse. It's just plain hard.

As I look back over my life and career, I can see God's active involvement in both my successes and failures. But at the time, I didn't always see His involvement in my failures. Sometimes it seemed like he had abandoned me. I'm sure you've never felt that way, right?

But time has a way of putting life into perspective. In hindsight, I now see that God really was involved in even the smallest details of my life. I've gotten a glimpse of why things might have happened the way they did. I'm now more fully aware of how God was involved in each part of my career.

Each season. Each game. Each kick.

In the pages ahead, I'll share with you some examples of how God has worked in my life through pain and hardship, and how He helped me to win in spite of them. It shows that hard times have been important to my life because they've brought me closer to God, and they've helped push me deeper into His Word for understanding.

God has made me a very different person than I was when I started my NFL journey in the late nineties. And the Bible has changed the way I look at everything in life.

Winning By the Book

As a professional athlete, I've continuously worked with people who are obsessed with winning. Winning is the goal of every game, and winning a championship is the goal of every season.

My performances were judged by whether or not I helped my team win games and championships.

It's pretty easy to define winning when it comes to sports. If you have more points than your opponent at the end of the game, you win. If you win enough of the time, people call you a winner.

But it's not so easy to define winning when it comes to life. That's why I want to take a "time out" early in this book to explain what I mean when I write about winning. It's a perspective that's been shaped and reshaped by God's Word.

Biblical winning is different than the world's view of winning. And winning in life is much more important than winning in sports. The stakes are higher.

After reading through the Bible, and after reflecting back over my experiences of winning and losing (on the field and off), I would define winning in life this way:

- Win-ning, v.** 1. *Overcoming the hardships and obstacles in life to emerge victorious in the areas that are important to God;*
2. *Staying faithful and obedient to God and His Word, regardless of how hard it is;*
3. *Hearing God say, "Well done."*

Here's the thing. We can't win all the time in every area of life. So, we have to focus our priorities on the things that are most important to God, and give our greatest efforts in those areas. But often, the things that are important to God aren't the things that are important to the world—or to us.

Here's an example: We know that one of the most important things to God is people. The most famous verse in the Bible, John 3:16, says that God loves people and gave His Son to suffer and die for them. So, if you're stepping on people to get where you want to go, you may be a winner in the eyes of others, but you'll never be a winner in the eyes of God.

Ultimately, God defines winning. Not by you and me.

Pressing On

Church historians believe that the apostle Paul was an athlete. He was definitely familiar with the games during his time. He used a bunch of sports metaphors when writing his letters to different

New Testament churches.

Here's my favorite of Paul's sports metaphors:

"I press on take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:12b-14).

Do you hear the sense of passion and purpose in Paul's words? He used words like straining and pressing on. This should be a clue that winning is hard. It means that to win, we'll have to overcome obstacles and persevere.

The word *straining* reminds me of the P90X workouts I've done throughout the off-seasons of my career. They are hardcore. I was so into P90X at one time that I became a paid endorser for them.

One of the things I like about the program is that it provides a different workout each day. The workouts are designed to create "muscle confusion," which keeps you from ever plateauing in your workout.

I also like P90X because the results of my workouts are really up to me. I'll get as much out of it as I put into it. The more I strain, the closer I'll get to my reward. So I strain toward what is ahead and press on toward my goals.

Whenever you do any kind of strength training, the key is to press hard enough to strain your muscles so that you actually cause them to tear. Sounds counter-intuitive, doesn't it? Tearing your muscles sounds like a bad thing, but when you strain your muscles in a controlled workout, you actually cause micro-tears in the tissue that then heal and cause the muscle to grow bigger and stronger.

So, straining your muscles is really a good thing that makes you able to handle more in the future. The same thing happens when we strain and press on with our spiritual lives.

As they say "No pain, no gain."

Paul was willing to go through the pain to get to the gain. For him, the prize at the end of his lifelong race was Heaven. That's why he was willing to work so hard. That's why he hung in there and pressed on.

The prize was so worth it.

It's worth it for you and me, as well. That's why I've written this book.

It's hard to hang in there when times get really hard, and it feels like everything in your world is falling apart. I want to help you not give up. I want to help you persevere so that you, too, will win the prize—in spite of your suffering and failures.

Winning the Prize

Here's another favorite sports metaphors from Paul:

“Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air. No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize” (1 Corinthians 9:24-27).

Once again, Paul points to the prize for those of us to win in life. He says it's an eternal prize. Heaven. And because the prize is so important, Paul says we must go into training. Spiritual training.

From the tone of his words, I get the feeling Paul had a very rigorous training regimen in mind. He's not going to be a fighter throwing punches in the air. He's going to jump in the ring and let others beat on his body. That's his idea of training.

Maybe you haven't realized it, but you're in training, too. So am I. We're all being prepared to win the prize.

The chapters ahead are about that training. They lay out the regimen

that God has given us in His Word. Each chapter focuses on one of nine aspects of this training plan.

I should probably tell you right up front that I was born and raised in Kentucky. And as we say in the Blue Grass state, I got myself a good ole Kentucky “edumaction.” I’m a simple guy who doesn’t use a lot of flowery speech to say things. I keep it real. And I keep it simple.

That’s why I’ve labeled each aspect of this training with a word that begins with the same letter, P. It helps me keep it straight. Maybe it’ll help you, too.

All of these Ps are firmly based in the truth of the Bible. Each of them could be applied to winning and losing football games, but they also apply to life. Each one has helped me to win in spite of the hardships that I’ve had to face.

The book is divided into two halves—like a football game. In the first half of the book, I look at the mindset of what it takes to emerge victoriously in this life. It’s the internal training that precedes our action. I take a closer look at the Pain that we all must endure and how perseverance, perspective, priorities, and passion each help us emerge from the Pain victoriously.

In the second half of the book, I focus more on what it takes to be a contributing teammate on the field. I focus on your participation in the game, as well as the personnel and the practice that it takes for each of us to perform well. I then address how you can use the platform God has given you to impact the lives of others.

In addition to the two halves, there’s also a pregame section with a Pregame Speech by my coach, mentor, and friend John Harbaugh. (You don’t want to miss that!) And there’s an overtime chapter at the end that will give you a final challenge.

I pray that God will use the book you’re holding as a tool to help you understand what true winning is all about. And I pray that He’ll use it to bring encouragement, challenge, and growth to your life—to help you win in spite of whatever life throws your way.