

# BEN & JULIANNA ZOBRIST DOUBLEPLAY

■ FAITH AND FAMILY FIRST ■



WITH MIKE YORKEY

**DOUBLE  
PLAY**

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BEN & JULIANNA  
ZOBORIST

WITH MIKE YORKEY



NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

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This book is dedicated to Zion and Kruse, God's gifts to us through our love for each other. We wanted you to have these stories in detail so that you would know how God has orchestrated the love between us. It is never perfect, and often difficult, but we enjoy the story God has given us to proclaim His grace in our lives. He truly holds all things together (Col. 1:17).

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# INTRODUCTION

## **BEN**

Nearly three hundred times a year, I leave the on-deck circle and approach home plate at Tropicana Field, the domed stadium that's home to my team, the Tampa Bay Rays.

My gait is slow and purposeful as I carry a 34-inch, 32-ounce F165 Louisville Slugger, weighted and balanced to my specifications. Toward the top of the flame-tempered bat, my name is etched into the wood. For a kid who grew up playing backyard Wiffle ball games in a small Illinois farm town, that's pretty cool.

During the five seconds or so that it takes me to reach the batter's box, a song plays loudly on the huge speakers suspended from the rafters. Every home team batter who comes to the plate gets to choose a "walk-up" song that plays in the background.

I know my walk-up song well because I know the singer even better. Every time I step up to the plate, I hear the soaring, angelic melodies of my wife, Julianna. Out of the 750 major league baseball

players, I'm sure that I'm the only batsman who takes the plate with his better half singing in the background.

That's pretty cool too.

I've been using Julianna's songs as my walk-up music since the 2009 season. I got some good-natured teasing in the clubhouse for bringing my wife onto the field, so to speak. "Is that a girl singing?" one of my teammates asked. The typical walk-up song has a big bass-driven beat, a manly kind of feel with growly vocals. Think heavy metal or hip-hop. Julianna's music has a beat but with more of a rock pop sound.

"Yeah, that's Julianna," I said. "Isn't she great?"

Just as it's my desire to use my God-given talent on the baseball field, I want Julianna to use her God-given gift for music to impact others.

One of the first songs she wrote, "The Tree," was my walk-up music for the 2009 and 2010 seasons, followed by "Only You" in 2011 where Juliana sang, *I want you and only you and no one else will ever do*. She wasn't singing about me but rather our Lord and Savior. In 2012 and 2013, I chose "Behind Me." (Sample lyric: *I'm going crazy/trying to find my way again/gotta leave it all behind me . . .*)

Singing is something my artistic-minded wife loves to do, just as I love playing baseball. She's been singing in public since junior high when she joined the worship band at her father's church.

I like being in a supporting role for Julianna's musical aspirations, which is why we live near Music City—Nashville, Tennessee—during baseball's offseason. Nobody recognizes me on Music Row or in downtown Franklin, our hometown, which is fine by me. If folks do, they leave us alone. That's quite a contrast to Tampa Bay, where things can get pretty intense during the baseball season.

Julianna and I have been married eight years, and we're a close-knit couple. I admire how Jules—as her close friends and I call

her—puts herself out there, baring her soul and her artistic side on stage. She has a passion for performing as well as letting her creative juices flow when she gets into a recording studio with a producer.

How God brought together two pastors' kids from the nation's heartland to form a double-play combination, if you will, is a unique story that we love to share. We both come from large families: Julianna grew up with five siblings in Iowa City, Iowa, and I come from a family of five children that planted roots in the checkerboard farmlands of Eureka in central Illinois.

Now we're teaming up in *Double Play*. As you'll soon read, there were too many coincidences and "God things" that happened along the way not to believe that the Lord brought us together as part of His plan for our lives.

## JULIANNA

My husband is the greatest, and he'll do anything to support me, as our story will illustrate.

A couple of years ago, I was in my snowy hometown of Iowa City, Iowa, visiting my parents with Ben, and our two children, Zion and Kruse. The month was January, and we were a month away from the start of baseball's spring training. Ben was preparing for his seventh year playing for the Tampa Bay Rays.

Whenever we're in my hometown, my dad—Jeff Gilmore, the pastor of Parkview Church—often invites me to lead the singing with the worship band. Ever since I've been a little girl, I've loved to perform in front of others, especially when I can sing about God's love and glorious nature.

On this particular Sunday morning, before the first of three services, I stepped off the stage and found a quiet place to be by myself. I always have this private moment, especially in a church,

so that I can pray and ask the Lord for wisdom on how I should sing that day. If I am not familiar with the church, I don't want to perform in such a way that people are uncomfortable. At the same time, I like to be . . . energetic and exuberant. It's all about finding the right balance sometimes. My main goal is to share the message of Christ in an entertaining and compelling way, so if the way I perform—or even dress—hinders that goal, then I want to be careful.

I prayed, and I felt like the Lord was directing me to perform like I always do. In other words, have fun doing it. Throw caution to the wind.

I went out there and sang my heart out. I had a blast leading Dad's congregation through singing worship songs. Even though I was pretty spent after the third service, my energy was revived when an excited woman sought me out afterward.

"You're *such* a wonderful singer and fantastic performer," she exclaimed. "I'm a producer with the MovieGuide awards show that takes place in Los Angeles in two weeks, and we just had an artist cancel on us. Would you be interested in singing in her place?"

My heart sank. "We're going to be in Dallas," I replied. "My husband is committed to speaking at a baseball banquet at his old school, Dallas Baptist University. I'm supposed to be there."

"Oh, that's too bad, but I understand. It's short notice and everything. Maybe next time . . ."

"Wait a minute," I said. "Let me talk to Ben. Maybe something could be worked out."

When I told Ben about the opportunity, he didn't blink an eye. "Yeah, you need to do this. It'll be a great experience." He was just as thrilled as me that I'd get to sing in front of a star-studded audience on national TV.

The logistics of going out to the West Coast for an awards show were a bit difficult, but what we worked out was that our

three-year-old son, Zion, would stay with Ben in Dallas, where my sister Liz and her family lived. Then my mother, Cheryl Gilmore, and I would fly from Dallas to Los Angeles with my five-month-old daughter, Kruse, on my lap. The welcome news that the MovieGuide folks would provide first-class tickets was another indicator that this was a big deal.

The 2012 MovieGuide Faith & Values Awards Gala was a special evening where a full house of Christian movie stars, producers, and executives would gather to honor movies and television programs that inspire viewers rather than offend them. The annual event is known as the “Christian Oscars” in the entertainment industry.

For someone who had grown up in the Midwest, I felt like I was in a movie when I arrived at the Universal Hilton Hotel near the heart of Hollywood. Black limos stretched for more than a block. Glamorous actresses stepped out in shimmery dresses from Christian Dior and Oscar de la Renta, on the arms of handsome men in double-breasted tuxedos. A scrum of cameramen jostled for position and called out to stars like Corbin Bernsen of *L.A. Law*, James Patrick Stuart of *Call of Duty*, and Dean Cain, the emcee for the evening who starred in *Lois & Clark: The New Adventures of Superman* and *Beverly Hills 90210*, the drama series that aired in the 1990s. I thought I recognized a few singers from the current season of *American Idol*.

This was my first red carpet experience! I love fashion and dressing up, so before I went to Los Angeles, I shopped for a stylish new outfit. I was in seventh heaven clicking through the Saks Fifth Avenue website and finally chose a black sleeveless evening dress with sewn-on silver sequins in a zebra pattern. The knee-length outfit from Torn by Ronny Kobo lifted my confidence because I had delivered a baby five months earlier and wanted to look my best. I also had my hair stylist back home in Franklin

streak several tresses of my long black hair in three shades of vibrant color: fuchsia, “My Little Pony” pink, and Derby Clementine, which was a tangerine-colored hue.

Even though I didn’t have a gorgeous guy in black tie escorting me, I still had a great time walking the red carpet with a MovieGuide-logoed backdrop. I understood where I was on the food chain and knew the cameras weren’t necessarily pointed in my direction, but it was fun pretending that the paparazzi were yelling, “Look this way, luv” at me.

Actually, several camera crews were interested in interviewing me, including Cooper Harris with Media Mingle TV. She was chatty and spirited, in keeping with the energy of the event.

“I’m here with Julianna Zobrist, who not only has amazing style but also amazing talent,” Cooper began in the form of an introduction. “She will be performing later this evening.”

“I am! I’m singing ‘Say It Now,’ a new song off my EP coming out April 10.” My smile had to be over one hundred watts.

“That’s so exciting!” Cooper gushed. “Is this your first album?”

“It’s my second, but it’s my first real push.”

“What is the gist of your music? What is your genre?”

“My genre? I don’t really know if you can categorize me. Pop, fun, dancey. It’s Christian pop, basically.”

I noticed Cooper looking at my multicolored hair. “I think your hair is gorgeous,” she said. “I love it. It’s kind of inspirational. But I have to ask you about your husband. I’m a huge, huge geek when it comes to baseball players. What’s he like?” she asked conspiratorially.

I was used to questions like this. “He’s *totally* normal! He’s amazing and the best man in the world in my opinion.”

“He plays for the Rays, right?”

Cooper knew her ballplayers, but I figured many viewers would have no idea who the Rays were. “Yes, he plays for the Tampa Bay Rays. He’s their second baseman,” I said.

When the two-minute interview was over, a couple of other camera crews caught my attention for snappy stand-up interviews, which I was glad to do. Then I made my way backstage to prepare myself.

I was extremely nervous. Maybe it was all the cameras, all the Hollywood people, or the knowledge that the MovieGuide awards show would be broadcast nationwide on the Hallmark Channel with a potential audience in the millions, but I had plenty of butterflies bumping into each other inside of me. I’d sung in a lot of big churches, before big crowds when I was in college, but this was a big step up.

I found a quiet place backstage and started running the lyrics of “Say It Now” through my head. I had *never* done that before. I knew the song really well—I had written the lyrics—but I was nervous that I’d have one of those deer-in-the-headlights moments and freeze onstage. That’s every performer’s worst nightmare.

There was another concern. During rehearsal that afternoon, the show’s producers were very specific about where I needed to be at certain parts of the song. For instance, at the end of the first chorus, they wanted me facing stage left, where they would have a camera ready for me. Then as I started the second verse, I was to turn to my right and start walking stage right, where cameras on *that* side of the ballroom were waiting for me.

Since I was coming on just past the midpoint of the awards show, I had time to rehearse the lyrics and mentally prepare myself—and pray. It was also tricky walking around on the steel stairs because I was in stilettos, and I didn’t want my long, thin high heels to slip into the openings. Walking on my tippy toes solved that problem.

Finally, I was introduced by cohost Joe Mantegna, star of the ABC show *Criminal Minds*. The techno-beat track of “Say It Now” was piped in, and I was dialed up and ready to go. I sang smoothly as I walked toward stage left, looked into the camera, and moved into the first chorus:

*Be more, be more than beautiful  
You're not, you're not some stupid girl  
You've got something to say so  
Say it now, say it now, say it now*

*Be more, be more than typical  
It's not a make believe world  
You've got something to say so  
Say it now, say it now, say it now*

After four minutes and eighteen seconds of performing, I heard thunderous applause as I took a bow. Everything came off well, and I was extremely pleased. Talk about a big high as I walked off the stage. I could have floated back to Dallas where Ben and Zion were waiting for my return.

As I caught my breath in one of the dressing rooms, I thought about another question that Cooper Harris had asked me on the red carpet: “What’s your message?”

Here’s how I answered: “My message is mostly to young girls and young women, basically because I am one, so I can relate. I want young girls and women not to feel like they have to be perfect. I think there is a lot of pressure that we put on each other, for no reason than to be someone we can never be. I want girls to love who they are and love who the Lord made them to be, to embrace that and be bold.” What I meant was that you can’t be perfect, and that is why Christ came to this Earth.



That's where *Be more than beautiful, you're not some stupid girl* came from.

I wrote that lyric because something horrible happened to me when I was twelve years old.

# 1

## LEADING OFF

### BEN

I come from a baseball family.

I was always swinging a bat, throwing a ball, fielding grounders, or catching flies growing up. Since my father, Tom Zobrist, had played a lot of baseball when he was younger and loved the game, he put a neon yellow plastic bat into my grubby hands as soon as I could stand on my own two feet. He loves telling anyone who will listen that the first time I took BP—batting practice—was in our living room. I was two years old, swinging my plastic bat at a plum-sized plastic ball he underhanded from several feet away.

It didn't take long for me to get the hang of connecting the skinny bat with the gently pitched ball. I loved knocking that white orb around the living room, spraying the ball to all fields. Dad got a kick out of me connecting with his toss-ups—until the time I

knocked over a lamp. That's when Mom announced that we had to move batting practice to the backyard.

We were living in Kansas City, Missouri, at the time, while Dad was attending Calvary Bible College and preparing to become a church pastor. I was the second of what would become five children and his first son. In the backyard of our modest rental, he positioned me so that I could hit for the fences—the back of the house. If I hit the Wiffle ball onto the roof, I made a home run. At age four, there was nothing more fun than hitting the plastic ball high up on the roof and watching it dribble back toward us.

A lot of the seminary students were fathers of young children, so Dad never had a problem putting a backyard game together. He'd be the pitcher for both teams—and the umpire—keeping the game organized and moving along. In the summer, we never wanted to go in for dinner and begged him for one more at-bat.

I played other sports besides baseball growing up. I liked kicking goals on the soccer field, shooting baskets in the driveway, and catching long passes in touch football. Even if I was playing pickup games with my friends, I loved competition and always had to win, which got me into trouble one time . . .

We had moved to Eureka, Illinois, population 5,000, the summer before I started first grade. That year, I can remember waiting for the lunch bell to ring at Davenport Elementary School. In less than a minute, we were expected to line up alphabetically and slowly walk to the boys' and girls' bathrooms, where we would wash our hands before we could go to the cafeteria for lunch. With a last name like Zobrist, I was always last, although there were times when they reversed things and I got to be first in line.

On this particular day, I had to line up last after the lunch bell rang. The girl in front of me, Mandy Yoder, wasn't keeping up as we inched forward. Couldn't she see that we were losing ground?

I had ants in my pants. I couldn't be the last to lunch. When we got close enough to the boys' bathroom, I spotted my chance. I broke for the door, pushing my way past slowpoke Mandy. Maybe I knocked her over.

Once I got inside the restroom, I could make up ground since no teachers were around. I jostled and elbowed my way past several classmates to one of the sinks, where I quickly dabbed my hands under the faucet and wiped my hands on my shirt.

I hustled out to the hallway with several classmates. We knew not to sprint because there was a "no running" policy in school hallways. That didn't stop us from speed walking, though. I was working my arms like an Olympian when my teacher stopped me.

"Young man, I saw you knock over Mandy," Miss Leman said. "I'm giving you a referral."

I had never gotten a referral before, but it didn't sound good.

The next day, the bell rung at the end of school—and I was surprised when my parents walked into the classroom. For some reason, I knew I was in trouble.

Dad spoke first. "Ben, Miss Leman tells me that you were pushing kids so that you could beat them to the bathroom and get to the cafeteria before anyone else."

I lowered my head. I didn't know what to say. He and Mom looked really serious.

"Look, God doesn't want us to be No. 1 all the time," Dad continued. "Sometimes He wants us to follow, so what your mother and I want you to do from now on is give deference to your classmates and let them go first whenever you get the opportunity. You need to let them go ahead. You need to learn to be polite. You don't always have to be first to do something."

That was a hard lesson to learn because of my competitive nature. I *always* had to win, whether we were playing H-O-R-S-E in the driveway or rolling the dice in Monopoly. Many times, I

would create a competition in my head so that I have something to shoot for—like beating my classmates to the cafeteria.

“Yes, Dad.”

My days of pushing past classmates were over, but my days of playing organized baseball began the summer after first grade when Dad signed me up for a Little League team comprised of seven-, eight-, and nine-year-old ballplayers. I had a bad “baseball birthday”—May 26. The cutoff date for our league was June 1, which meant that for the rest of my Little League career, I would always be competing against older kids.

I saw this as just another form of competition. I loved the challenge of playing against bigger kids who were one, two, or close to three years older than me. I hit the ball well and even held my own when I pitched, despite the age difference. (This was player-pitch baseball, not coach-pitched.) I loved playing any position, but there was something extra about being a pitcher. I relished the opportunity to get batters out or get them to swing and miss on strike three. There was something about the one-on-one battle between pitcher and batter that greatly appealed to my elevated sense of competition.

We usually played two games a week but that wasn’t enough baseball for me and my buddies in the neighborhood. We’d organize our own games and play in a vacant lot across the street from the Challys’ house, using a metal bat and a tennis ball, which flew a lot further than a hardball and had the added benefit of not breaking any windows in the neighborhood.

This was sandlot baseball at its purest level—a bunch of kids getting out there and playing without adult supervision. We usually had six players—including the three Chally brothers—playing three to a side. Two giant trees in left center field and right center field were our outfield “fences”: hit a fly ball past the tree or high into the overhanging branches and you had a home run. Fair

territory ran from left center field to right center field, which was patrolled by the two outfielders. A pitcher lobbed the tennis ball toward the hitter to start the action. We played “pitcher’s hand,” which meant if an outfielder picked up a ground ball and fired it back to the pitcher before the batter touched first base, he was out.

I was a natural right-handed hitter—I threw the ball with my right hand—but one day I noticed that the distance from home plate to the tree in right center was shorter. The thought dawned on me that I could hit more home runs if I batted left-handed. I jumped over to the left side of home plate, and on the first pitch, I crushed the ball and hit a long home run.

As we got older, we took our pick-up games to nearby Davenport Elementary School, where we had a backstop, a home plate, an infield, and a short fence in left field that invited right-handed hitters to swing from their heels. Sunday afternoons were a great time to play because we had Little League baseball games and practice during the week as well as Awana at church on Wednesday nights.

We played “real” baseball—using a hardball—but the pitcher was just lobbing the ball up there to let the batter hit it. Since we never had enough players but were using the entire baseball diamond, we continued to play “pitcher’s hand.” I didn’t hit many home runs, but when I did hit a round-tripper, it was always a thrill. I loved making my home run trot, pretending I was rounding the bases at Busch Stadium, home of the Zobrist family’s favorite team—the St. Louis Cardinals.

Every summer some of our extended family and some of my best friends growing up, including Jason Miller, would drive three hours from our hometowns in central Illinois to the “big city” of St. Louis to take in a couple of major league baseball games. The long weekend was part summer vacation trip and part reunion for a family tribe that was established when my great-great grandfather

Jakob Zobrist immigrated from Switzerland in 1867—right around the time that baseball was becoming popular and starting to form professional teams.

It took a lot of guts for my great-great grandfather to leave the old country back in the day. A trans-Atlantic crossing was no picnic, and neither was getting settled in a new land where everything was different—language, culture, and topography. There were no towering, jagged peaks in the Midwest.

Jakob and his family settled in the verdant flatlands of Morton, Illinois, to farm, milk cows, and make cheese. Looking back over the last 150 years, I can trace my genealogy in this fashion: Jakob had a son named Noah, who had a son named Alpha, who had my father Tom. I came along on May 26, 1981, the second of five children: I have an older sister named Jessica; a younger sister named Serena; and two younger brothers, Peter and Noah.

Dad needed the assistance of my mom, Cindi, to bring me into the world, of course. The timing of the way they met really shows how God orchestrated these events because if they didn't happen in a certain order, they wouldn't have gotten together.

On Monday, March 15, 1976, Dad was a high school senior at Morton High School. That morning he was in St. Louis, undergoing a physical as part of his enlistment into the U.S. Air Force later that summer. His family would have been strapped sending him to college, so joining the military made sense. Plus, he was ready to try something else in life.

Four days later, on Friday night, March 19, Dad took Cindi Cali out to the Sea Merchant restaurant and then a movie. They had a great time and liked each other's company. Cindi was also a senior at Morton High, and this was their first date. They made plans to see each other the following weekend.

On Monday evening, March 22, my mother-to-be was over at the house of her best friend and fellow cheerleader, Crystal

Ackerman, who talked to her about what it meant to have a personal relationship with Jesus. Crystal had been witnessing to my mother since the summer when they were roommates at a cheer-leading camp. This time when she heard the gospel presented, she believed in Jesus Christ as her Lord and Savior.

The next day at school, Mom told my father that she had placed her faith in Jesus and wanted to serve Him now. If he wasn't interested in doing that, then she didn't want to date him anymore.

Mom was just a day old in her faith, but she had a fervor that my father could not deny. My dad said he needed some time to think about it, and she agreed to keep seeing my father—but only on double dates with Crystal and her boyfriend, Barney Perkins.

Those double dates happened to be to Bible studies, Youth for Christ events, and Christian concerts. Slowly but surely, my father was exposed to more of the gospel. At an outreach rally on May 21, David Wilkerson, an evangelist and author of *The Cross and the Switchblade*, said that it took more than belonging to a church to follow Christ—it took commitment. That commitment involved a life of self-denial, taking up a cross, and living for Him.

My father heard the invitation and felt like he needed to make that commitment. He whispered to my mother that he was going forward, and she said she'd go with him. Hand in hand, they walked together to the front of the church, where my father prayed to receive Christ into his heart. What an emotional moment for the both of them, which they have never forgotten.

Then there was that other commitment that Dad had made—enlisting in the Air Force. When he left Morton for basic training at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas, the distance between Texas and Illinois pulled him away from his old friends and his old lifestyle. Dad was a partyer in high school, a guy who drank to get drunk on weekends more times than he cares to



remember. He gave that all up when he purged himself from his old friends after becoming a Christian and joining the Air Force.

Years later, Mom heard some of the drinking stories about my father. One time she told him, “I never would have gone out with you if I had known what you were like.”

“Well,” Dad said, “that was part of His plan. God shielded you from that so that you did go out with me, and that’s how I eventually got saved.”

While with the Air Force, Dad got involved with the Navigators, an interdenominational discipleship training organization that equips Christians for a life of faith. Even though they were living in different states, Dad and Mom grew closer and closer. Dad asked Mom to marry him in December 1976, and they were wed a year later on December 17, 1977, in a local church in Morton.

When Dad’s four-year commitment to the Air Force was over, they moved back to Morton, where Dad got involved with the family construction business. The economy was hit hard in the late 1970s and early 1980s—high inflation and high interest rates. There weren’t many houses to build, and Dad had four mouths to feed following the birth of my older sister, Jessica, and myself.

A guy who Dad knew at their home church was on the board of trustees for Calvary Bible College in Kansas City, and he thought my father had gifts that God could use in ministry. “You should think about becoming a pastor,” this fellow said. His church pastor and elder said the same thing to my father.

Dad prayed about it and felt God was leading him to Bible college. Fortunately for him, he had the G.I. Bill in his hip pocket after serving in the Air Force, so we moved to Kansas City. I was four or five years old at the time.

It was at this time in my life when I first remember hearing about the gospel from a Sunday school teacher. The part that really got my attention was when the teacher said that if you did

not accept Jesus Christ as your personal Savior, then you would go to hell when you die.

I had heard about hell. That was a hot, hot place where you didn't want to go. That night, I talked to Mom about what the teacher said and said I was scared. Mom told me that if I ask Jesus into my heart, then I didn't have to be afraid anymore. So that's what I did. That event happened so early in my life that I don't remember *not* being a Christian.

After Dad graduated from Calvary Bible, we moved back to Morton, where Dad did an internship at Grace Bible Church in Washington, Illinois, about ten miles away. When his yearlong internship was over in 1988, the congregation at Liberty Bible Church in Eureka, twenty miles from Morton, asked him to be their pastor. Twenty-five years later, he's still ministering to his flock.

Eureka was a great place to grow up. This small farming community has two stoplights, a courthouse, a compact downtown, abundant parks, and a private institution of higher learning known as Eureka College. President Ronald Reagan is the most famous graduate of the school, earning a degree during the Great Depression in 1932.

My parents were godly parents who poured themselves into their five children as well as their church members. I never felt any extra pressure being a "preacher's kid," although my parents used to joke that they had eyes everywhere in Eureka.

All five of us were good kids, well liked by our teachers and administrators—after I learned not to push past classmates at lunchtime. Not that I wasn't still competitive. I was always the first one to finish my tests in class, even though Mom told me that I didn't get any extra points for handing in my test before anyone else.

That competitive streak reared its head in the Awana program every Wednesday night at church. Awana is kind of like a Cub Scout/Girl Scout program where youngsters learn about the Bible and memorize verses that earn them patches for their red Awana vests.

Of course, I memorized dozens of verses to earn tons of patches. Of course, I went through my Awana book a second and third time and earned a series of review patches. Of course, I won the “Awana Olympics,” where I ran laps around the Awana circle and made a headfirst slide to knock the pin over in the center of the circle. I had the fastest time because I had this burning desire to be first in whatever I did.

Of course, I won the gold medal.

\* \* \* \*

One time when I was eight years old, I saw Dad on the living room floor doing sit-ups before he went out and jogged past nearby cornfields and wheat fields. He seemed really intent on what he was doing, which meant I should be intent and purposeful as well.

I could do sit-ups. I started counting off sets of twenty before I went to bed each night, and quickly worked my way up to a hundred sit-ups. One time Dad came into my bedroom as I was knocking off my last set.

“Nice job, son. Why are you doing so much exercise before going to bed?”

“Because I want to be strong,” I said. “I want to be in shape.”

I was always a self-starter. Coaches didn’t have to push me to get better. I was constantly asking coaches or teammates to hit me extra ground balls so I could get more glove work in. I wore out my coaches’ arms with extra batting practice. I’d hit or field until my coaches said it was time to call it a day.

I was just as determined in the other sports I played growing up—junior football, youth soccer, and biddy basketball in Eureka. I even ran cross-country and track; in seventh grade, I set a school record in the mile with a 5:01 (I really wanted to beat five minutes) and would set another record with a five-foot, six-inch high jump.

Going into high school, I was one of the smallest kids in my freshman class—five feet, five inches tall and weighing a buck-twenty. I could still play good baseball, though. I made the varsity baseball team and used the experience to get better.

Things changed when I hit my growth spurt in my junior year. I sprouted to six feet, one inch and weighed a bit more than 150 pounds. I was a pitcher and a position player who could hit the ball, so I played every inning. I was also a good basketball player on the varsity team—a starting point guard who helped run the offense and made my share of open jumpers.

By this time, we had moved to a two-acre property just outside of Eureka, where my best friend Jason Miller and I helped Dad build our “Field of Dreams”—a Wiffle ball diamond in our backyard. We used white spray paint for the foul lines, lined the outfield with garden fencing we bought for cheap, dug holes in the grass for each base and home plate, piled dirt for a small mound with a pitching rubber, and planted a flagpole beyond the center-field fence. Dad even went to Home Depot and bought twenty-foot poles that we topped with bright lights. All we had to do was run an extension cord from the house, and we had the only Wiffle ball field lit for night games in Illinois, perhaps the entire country.

We cut up old bed sheets and used them to cover the latticework of the rusty iron fencing. Then I spray-painted “Alpha Memorial Field” on the bed sheets after my grandfather, who passed away when my dad was only nine years old. I never got to meet Alpha Zobrist, but I thought naming the field after him was a fitting tribute for a family member who always loved baseball.

Now that we had our field ready for play, my buddies and I formed the Wiffle Ball '99 League that consisted of four teams with five guys on the roster. Ryan Mitchell and I were appointed co-commissioners. Every guy had to pay \$10 to play in the league, which went toward the cost of uniforms. Yup, we had team uniforms (T-shirts) and league rules, and before games, I took my time mowing the field just so. I mowed in straight lines from north to south—home plate to center field.

We had double-elimination tournaments in the summer, and our night games were spirited, as you'd expect when you put ten testosterone-filled high school boys into a small backyard field. One time, I was pitching to Ryan Mitchell when he flicked his wrists and homered over the left field fencing.

As Ryan rounded the bases, he broke one of baseball's unwritten rules—he tried to show up the pitcher. He talked trash the entire way and suddenly veered off the base path and rapped me on the back of the head with his hand. I was wearing a cheap plastic helmet with a St. Louis Cardinals logo, so his tap didn't hurt anything more than my pride, but it still stung.

"I dare you to step over the line!" I yelled as Ryan rounded third base and headed toward home.

After he touched home plate, Ryan stepped over the line and said, "What are you going to do about it?"

I charged Ryan and pushed him through a piece of garden fencing lining the backstop. I was dusting my hands and walking back to the pitcher's mound when he got up and jumped on my back. Suddenly, we were in the midst of an old-fashioned, bench-clearing baseball brawl. No punches were thrown, but I wasn't going to let Ryan get off the ground. We wrestled for a few minutes until my teammates pulled me off the pile.

I straightened myself up, and we shook hands because it was over. But I made my point: No one was going to beat me, not even in a baseball brawl.

Sports and competition meant everything to me growing up. Sports were what I was emotionally attached to. Sports were what I was most in love with. It didn't matter *which* sport I was playing, but I was consumed with winning and out-performing the next guy. Quite frankly, sports were my idol.

Little did I know that God would take sports away from me—and give it back in the most unexpected way.