

## Sports, the Word & Dr. Arp

Paul Golden

**T**he power of sports. Many professional athletes like Tim Tebow utilize the platform of sports for the cause of Jesus Christ. Dr. Bill Arp—a former athlete himself—also understood the power of sports and used it to influence others for the sake of the gospel. Earlier this week I attended an outreach event featuring Tebow as the guest speaker. The Heisman trophy winner-turned-baseball-player articulately shared his faith with the hundreds in attendance. If Dr. Arp were still living, I would have stopped by his Jackson Hall office the next day to inform him of the special evening which I experienced—we enjoyed talking sports and ministry. Even though it has been one year since the passing of Dr. Arp (July 2017), I still feel the loss of my regular interactions with him. Whether discussing our families, ministry or sports—his friendship and biblically-based wisdom is genuinely missed.

As I reflect on the legacy of Dr. Arp, he was not only a seminary professor and theologian, but also a godly husband, caring father, and grandfather. He exhibited the seemingly perfect balance of loving God (and his word) while loving the people God brought across his life's path. In addition to his faith and family, Dr. Arp took pleasure in sports. It comes as no surprise that he loved his Philadelphia franchises: primarily, the Phillies, Flyers, Sixers, and Eagles. In sum, Dr. Arp was the quintessential Philly sports fan. His allegiance to his teams was undisputed by anyone who knew Dr. Arp. Until recently, his teams—most notably the Eagles and Phillies—were consistently bad and usually at the bottom of their respective league standings. Despite year after year of losing seasons, Dr. Arp

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displayed loyalty (and the patience of Job) with his beleaguered teams. Interestingly, a few months after his death, Dr. Arp's beloved Philadelphia Eagles (finally) won the Super Bowl; Penn State won their major collegiate bowl game; and the Sixers made the NBA playoffs. At the time of this writing, his Fightin' Phils are battling for first place in the National League East. Undoubtedly, Dr. Arp would be extremely gratified with this newfound success in Philadelphia.

Every once in a while, the Phillies would (surprisingly) get on a winning streak. I would then congratulate Dr. Arp on his team's recent success on the ball field. Humorously, Dr. Arp would remind me it was still too early in the season to get excited about the consecutive victories (regardless if it were the start or end of the baseball campaign). With a smile and wit, he would assure me the Phillies would find the means to squander their winning ways. Dr. Arp was a realist when it came to any perceived success with his Phils. Dr. Arp possessed a unique approach to disarming rival fans. He often joked about one seminary colleague in particular—who occasionally reveled about his favorite sports team defeating Dr. Arp's team on the gridiron. Dr. Arp frequently quipped—with a grin on his face and in his one-of-a-kind Dr. Arp voice—"some people are sore losers—he's a sore winner."

Dr. Arp employed the topic of sports to create connections with individuals---strangers and friends alike. He knew so many people and, more often than not, remembered their favorite teams. By expressing interest in them (with something as inconsequential as a favorite team), Dr. Arp cultivated the relationship. His disarming demeanor enabled one to interact freely with Dr. Arp—sports being the gateway to deeper dialogue. The seemingly surface-level conversations led to in-depth exchanges about life, marriage, and ministry. Regularly he would inquire about my chaplain ministry to the local professional hockey team. Since he was a former chaplain, I truly appreciated Dr. Arp's insights and encouraging words. (I sometimes wish that Dr. Arp were still living and a short walk down the hall to his office so I could seek his advice and counsel as I interact with my chapel guys). Dr. Mark McGinniss—a friend of Dr. Arp and fellow seminary

professor—recounts a similar exchange. On countless Monday mornings during the football season, Dr. Arp would ask McGinniss what Mark's father—an avid fan--thought about the Giants' performance on the football field the day before. It was a special way for Dr. Arp to connect not only with Dr. McGinniss, but display his gracious interest in Mark and his family.

In the community, Dr. Arp, his son, Joshua, and grandson Billy would be a regular spectators at the local high school football and basketball games. Although not his alma mater, for decades Arp was an ardent enthusiast of the Baptist Bible College (now Clarks Summit University) men's basketball program. (No more so then when his daughter's boyfriend—now son-in-law—Derek Mosher played on the BBC hardwood.) Furthermore, Dr. Arp attended Red Barons' games, Penn State football games in Happy Valley, and Bucknell basketball games. This former high school and college athlete from Williamsport, PA, enjoyed doing life with his family and friends—it was even more gratifying when spending time with family and friends at sporting events.

### **Connecting with People**

Dr. Arp was not an over-the-top sports fan—he knew the proper priority of sports in his life. Dr. Arp unquestionably had the right perspective on athletics in light of eternity. What I loved about Dr. Arp is this: he intentionally used his love of sports to impact others spiritually. This is best exemplified in his Baseball Chapel ministry. From 1992-2007, Dr. Arp combined his love for God and God's word with his love for baseball by serving as the chaplain for the Scranton/Wilkes-Barre Red Barons (the AAA affiliate of his favorite team, the Philadelphia Phillies). For fifteen seasons, Dr. Arp faithfully brought messages to both the Red Barons and the visiting teams that passed through the minor league ballpark in Moosic, PA. I confidently believe his depth of theological knowledge coupled with his ability to communicate the truths of the Bible impacted hundreds and hundreds of ballplayers. Only eternity will reveal the extent of his influence from his Sunday chapels. Not only

was his influence felt at the stadium, but also Dr. Arp and his dearly loved wife, Joanna, had an incredible ministry to the professional athletes away from the stadium. The Arps frequently invited the ballplayers and wives into their home for meals. Anyone who knew the Arps most likely experienced and enjoyed their fine hospitality and welcoming environment at their Clarks Summit home. In addition to delicious home cooked meals, the Arps conducted Bible studies with the players and wives. Dr. Arp's love for the church was evidenced by encouraging his chapel guys to attend his local church along with him. On numerous occasions, I recall seeing his chapel guys worshipping at Heritage Baptist Church (Clarks Summit, PA). The players attended the early worship service at Heritage before heading to the ballpark for the game later that day. While a student at Baptist Bible Seminary, I remember several SWB players sitting in on Dr. Arp's classes (Introduction to the New Testament/NT Literature and Biblical Hermeneutics). Many of the men were drawn to his knowledge of the Scriptures, including his ability to explain the significance of the biblical context (and authorial intent of course). It was fascinating to see Dr. Arp's "two worlds" collide---the professor and the chaplain, the classroom and the clubhouse, the Bible and baseball.

Although Dr. Arp wished to see his ballplayers excel professionally, his greater concern was their spiritual condition. If a player was not a follower of Christ, Arp's desire was to introduce that player to the gift of salvation through Jesus Christ. If a player was already a born-again Christian, his objective was to contribute to the individual's spiritual growth. Without question, numerous men blossomed spiritually under his significant ministry in their lives.

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The following testimonies are representative of Dr. Arp's influence on countless athletes and their spiritual walk:

### ***Kyle Abbott***

*There are some men you meet in your life whose example of what it means to love as Jesus loved us is burned in your psyche. These types of men are role models for those young in their faith. Bill Arp was one of those men in my life. I am grateful for having had him pour his knowledge and love of Jesus into my life! He has shaped me as a man and a follower of Jesus Christ.*

Kyle met Dr. Arp while playing for the Red Barons in 1992-1993. He also played four seasons in MLB with the California Angels and Philadelphia Phillies. He resides in the Dallas-Fort Worth area, coaching and instructing pitching. Following Dr. Arp's example, Kyle also served as chaplain for the Texas Rangers from 2000-2007. After his baseball career, Kyle earned his Master of Theology degree from Dallas Theological Seminary (2002). Dr. Arp was one of the major influences in his pursuit of the ThM degree.

### ***JC Show***

*Dr. Arp was an amazing example and influence to my family and I. My parents would tell stories about how knowledgeable Dr. Arp was in the Bible, as he taught their Sunday school class. The first—and most important—encouragement Dr. Arp gave me was his overall knowledge of the God he loved and served. As a local high school athlete, I was always encouraged by Dr. Arp's consistent support at numerous Abington Heights games. It was always nice to play a football game on a Saturday afternoon, and then discuss the game with Dr. Arp at church on Sunday. Even when I went away to college to play basketball at Bucknell University, Dr. Arp still made time to come support our team and me. His investment into supporting me as an athlete was encouraging, but his example of living for the Lord was the biggest thing I will take away from his life. He would always tell me he was praying for me whenever he saw me, and he was a sounding board for wisdom and guidance to my parents and me. I am grateful to have been one of the many lives touched by Dr. Arp. It is encouraging for me to know that he is heaven with the God he so faithfully served.*

As a gifted athlete, JC was a two-year captain and all-state football player, and a three-year captain and three-time all-state basketball player while at Abington Heights High School (Clarks Summit, PA). His senior year of high school he was named “Mr. Basketball” in Pennsylvania. In addition, he received the prestigious Gatorade Player of the Year award (2014). Following one season of collegiate basketball at Bucknell, JC transferred to Binghamton University (NY) playing two full seasons to date (2016-17, 2017-18). JC’s father served as the men’s basketball coach at Clarks Summit University for 20+ years.

### ***Mickey Weston***

*When my wife Lisa and I arrived in Scranton in 1992 to play for the Phillies’ AAA professional baseball team, we met the chaplain for the team and were concerned about his spiritual condition. We desired to have a couple’s Bible study and realized he would not be a good fit to lead the study. After some research, Lisa contacted Baptist Bible Seminary and asked a secretary if she knew of someone who might be interested in leading the study. She immediately pointed us to Dr. Bill Arp. Little did we know that it would be the beginning of a lifelong friendship between our families. Bill and Joanna Arp, along with all of their family, welcomed us and another couple (Pat and Christina Combs), and Kyle Abbott into their home to feed us physically, emotionally, and most importantly, spiritually. Bill and Joanna became spiritual mentors to both Lisa and me. Soon after meeting, Bill was brought in to replace the current chaplain for the Red Barons. I believe it was almost a dream-come-true for this life-long Phillies fan. Bill loved to teach the word and he loved to talk baseball. That summer we lived in Clark Summit less than 10 minutes from the Arp’s home. It seemed like if we had any time off, we spent that time at their house. Bill and I spent hours talking about how the word of God affects our daily life. We gained great insight into raising our kids by learning how they had developed such close relationships with their own children. Bill and I spent countless hours discussing what was wrong with the Phillies and how those issues could be fixed. I am not sure we had anything to do with it, but the Phillies were in*

*the World Series the next year. Though Lisa and I spent only one season with the Red Barons, our relationship with the Arps continues to this day. Through phone calls, occasional visits, letters, and notes we maintained our relationship over the last 25 plus years. Bill's wisdom, humor, knowledge, and great love are sorely missed. I look forward to the day when he and I will be able to have a nice game of catch in Glory.*

Mickey played fifteen years of professional baseball with the Phillies, Mets, Orioles and Blue Jays. He currently serves with Baseball Chapel as the chaplain for the Chicago White Sox. Mickey also serves as the executive director of UPI (Unlimited Potential Inc.). UPI's mission is to "reach, teach, and train baseball players for the purpose of sending them out into the world to make disciples of Jesus who love God passionately and love others radically." Mickey has ministered in 40 countries since serving with UPI in 1996. Lisa Weston serves with Baseball Chapel coordinating the women's ministry throughout the major and minor leagues.

### ***Dan Giese***

*Bill Arp made a huge impact on many of us during our playing time in Scranton. Bill was the perfect fit at the AAA level. Many players at that level go through huge transitions in their lives--whether it was starting a family, getting married, making it to the big leagues for the first time, or retiring from the game. Bill helped us navigate the toughest waters. I will never forget the times I got to meet his family for a home-cooked meal or the time he would spend just making sure we were okay and taken care of. We shared the same local church and he invited me to the seminary just to chat on many occasions. Bill had a huge heart and loved people. I considered Bill a dear friend and I will never forget the times he would call over the years just to say hello and check in. He is dearly missed. Thank you for all you did for us over the years, Dr. Bill. I look forward to listening to a ball game with you, on the radio of course, in Heaven.*

A native of California, Dan met Dr. Arp while playing with the Phillies organization (2003-2006). Dan also played professionally with the San Francisco Giants, Oakland Athletics, and the New York Yankees. Following his retirement from baseball as a pitcher, Dan became a scout for the NY Yankees. Dan currently serves with the Yankees as their Director of Pro Scouting. Dan and Shannon along with their family reside in Greenwich, CT.

### ***Pat Combs***

*Bill Arp was the team Baseball Chapel leader during the time I was with the Scranton/Wilkes-Barre Red Barons. I was introduced to Bill shortly after I arrived in SWB on a rehab assignment from the Phillies. Bill and I became fast friends. Our families also became close during my time in Scranton. My wife, Christina, still frequently corresponds with Bill's daughters. You could say that we became lifelong friends. Bill's son, Josh, and I spent time together when he was young and have stayed in touch after my time in baseball. I will never forget taking in my first air show with Josh and Bill. That was a fun day!*

*Bill Arp was one of the finest men I have ever known. He was the consummate gentleman. Bill had a true servant's heart and was one of the first men I observed that modeled the life and behavior of Jesus. Bill would always end our discussions with a kind word of encouragement and a reminder that his family was available to help us (Christina, my sons and me) whenever we needed assistance. His daughter, Jeanne, babysat our boys on many occasions, just to give Christina a break, especially when I was on the road playing ball. Bill also had a heart for discipleship, and we spent many hours together studying the Word of God and bantering questions and answers.*

*On one particular Sunday, we had a late extra-inning Saturday night game, and I knew it would be difficult to get players to chapel. Bill walked in the locker room and could sense it was a somber clubhouse. I pulled Bill aside and told him that we would be a little light in attendance and that it may be just him and me that day. He told me, "No worries, God always brings the men he*

*wants when he wants them.” We walked into our television room, where we had chapel on Sundays and one of the players was taking a nap. I tried to wake him and explain that we would be starting chapel that day. He did not want to move and so stayed and listened in a half-awake posture. By the end of our time together, this particular player was asking Bill how he could know this Jesus, and Bill led him in a prayer to trust him that day. Bill was right... God had the man he wanted that day and that player turned to God through Bill’s ministry.*

*For three summers, Bill spoke truth into my life and impacted me as a man, husband, and a father. He made me a better man, because he cared for me and showed me the love of Christ every moment we were together. He was not enthralled that I was a professional athlete, although he sure loved the game of baseball. He was more concerned about my spiritual growth and maturity in Christ and that part of him showed up every time we were together. Bill Arp is one of the men that I really look forward to seeing again one day in the presence of God. That round, jovial face of his always brought a smile, and we will get to enjoy each other for eternity!*

A first-round draft pick by the Phillies in 1988, Pat played four MLB seasons with Philadelphia (1989-1992). In 1989, he started the year in minor league A-level and quickly reached the major league by the end of the season. Pat currently resides in Texas and is employed in the private sector.

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In his pastoral epistle, the Apostle Paul writes these words to his spiritual son, Timothy: “And what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also” (2 Tim 2:2, ESV). Dr. Arp devoted 45 years of his life to training the next generation for the cause of Christ. His formal teaching ministry in the college and seminary classroom certainly did train faithful men and women just as Paul exhorted Timothy. Moreover, Dr. Arp’s ministry outside the formal classroom to athletes emulated Paul’s challenge. It is satisfying to fathom Dr. Arp’s impact as

he taught and encouraged many baseball-playing Timothys. His legacy continues to this day through the men he influenced as their chaplain.

In 2018, I was privileged to become the chaplain for the Scranton/Wilkes-Barre RailRiders (the New York Yankees' AAA affiliate). Although it has a different team name and affiliation, I occupy the exact chaplain position that Dr. Arp held for fifteen seasons with the Red Barons. It is an incredible honor to hold the same role that my friend and beloved professor possessed. Ironically, Dan Giese attended the second chapel I held as RailRiders' chaplain. As I looked across the room and saw Dan that Sunday morning, the thoughts of Dr. Arp's life and friendship came flooding to my mind. At that special moment, I cherished the man of God that had enhanced both Dan's life and my own. We are just two examples of the legacy of Dr. Arp's use of sports to influence others spiritually. To God be the glory for the great things God has accomplished through his servant, Dr. Bill Arp: the professor and chaplain—in the classroom and in the clubhouse—with the Bible and baseball.