



I watched a football game the other day. I couldn't help remembering former Oklahoma University coach Bud Wilkinson's quip about the irony of "20,000 people who desperately need exercise watching 22 men who desperately need rest."

Well, that's the way it was. We all sat there shivering in our carcoats, downing hot dogs and coffee, while the sweating players grunted and struggled against each other in the mud.

Don't get me wrong — we, the fans, kept busy, yelling and cheering. In fact, we even had our own leaders, a corps of young coeds who kept warm by jumping, running, clapping and cartwheeling. Their sole job was to keep us making noise, and they succeeded.

There was other noise as well, which

the cheerleaders had nothing to do with. The head coaches and their assistants were yelling instructions through cupped hands during the huddles on the field and lecturing their various platoons on the sidelines. I got the distinct impression that their yelling was doing much more good than mine.

So I stopped. And I started thinking about the parable being played out before me. And suddenly some fuzzy thoughts about the charismatic movement and especially its leaders started coming into focus.

Two sets of leaders on that field: cheerleaders and coaches. The one is supposed to look attractive and put on a good show. The other is supposed to mastermind a victory. The one deals in impressions. The other deals in results.

And I started wondering whether the occasional shallowness and immaturity of charismatic people and

groups might be due to a little too much cheerleading and not enough coaching. I recalled more than one meeting in my lifetime that was honestly more of a spiritual pep rally than anything else. I had come away fairly psyched up, but lacking in practical ways to grow. There wasn't a whole lot that would survive until Monday.

Maybe what is needed are pastors, teachers and evangelists who see themselves essentially as strategists who train and inspire God's team to score touchdowns. Some reasons why:

*Coaches motivate a team; cheerleaders are a team of their own.* Coaches don't actually hand off to the running backs, kick the field goals, or blitz the other team's passer. They show their players how to do it. When it comes to game time, the coaches don't do a lot, physically. They don't wear any special uniform to draw

attention. They are concerned only with *making things happen* through the athletes in their charge.

Cheerleaders, on the other hand, put on a show themselves. If the fans care to join in and clap in rhythm as they go through their routines, fine. But if the grandstands were empty, the cheerleading squad could still go on. They are essentially a self-contained unit.

When we read the letters written by the first-century apostles, the *coach mentality* is unmistakable. They view themselves as shepherds caring for God's flock. Paul is not interested in rah-rah; "I do not run aimlessly," he says in 1 Corinthians 9:26,27, "I do not box as one beating the air; but I pommel my body and subdue it, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified."

*Coaches are flexible; cheerleaders are programmed.* A coach may be able to tell you his "game plan" ahead of time — but five minutes into the first quarter he may be telling his quarterback, "Forget it. Instead, let's . . ." He is never sure what the enemy is going to throw at him, and so he's constantly ready to shift his style of attack. He doesn't do everything the same way every time; he mixes things up even in practice to keep his players alert and involved. If a certain roll-out pattern isn't working, he throws it away and comes up with something better.

The men God is using today are men who know that methods are not sacred, even though the message is. They do not insist on 1954 patterns in 1975; they keep their eyes on the goal and scramble to get there fastest.

In contrast, the very essence of cheerleading is pattern. Beautiful, precise, symmetrical, well-executed routines. It's all very impressive — the first few times around. But by the end of the season, fans and cheerleaders alike are a little bored by it all. Cheerleading is artificial; it's cute, contrived, sometimes even corny. But the show must go on . . .

*Coaches have a place for silence; cheerleaders don't.* When a player is hurt or discouraged, a good coach uses

his sixth sense and knows whether to keep quiet. He does a lot of talking, true, but also knows when he's said enough. He takes time to listen, to ask questions ("Has anybody figured out their 'audibles' yet?" "Why are we jumping off-side?") and to wait for answers. In his locker room speeches, his pauses are often the most effective moments of all.

Not so with cheerleaders. Their sole job is to make noise. A quiet grandstand is the kiss of death. They get nervous if the crowd isn't yelling, even if it's fourth down and 22 with the score 0-35. *We've gotta have some action! Come on, you guys! Go, team, go* — and they launch yet another routine. They may even cry.

But their agony is shallow compared with the coach's at that moment. His mind is churning, searching for the right words to turn his team around. He understands the full depth of what's going on. As Paul said in 2 Corinthians 6:4-6, "In everything we do we try to show that we are true ministers of God. We patiently endure suffering and hardship and trouble of every kind. We have been beaten, put in jail, faced angry mobs, worked to exhaustion, stayed awake through sleepless nights of watching, and gone without food. We have proved ourselves to be what we claim . . . (Living Bible).

*Coaches analyze and strategize; cheerleaders only entertain.* Coaches are not hired for their good looks, or even because they may have been star players at one time. They are hired for their brains, their ability to think things through, to break down a play or formation into its smallest pieces and then put it back together in perfect shape. They must inspire their teams, but they do so on the foundation of solid planning and practice; they are not interested in frothy enthusiasm that has no basis. Like Timothy, they are asked to be "unfailing in patience and in teaching . . . Always be steady" (2 Tim. 4:2,5).

Cheerleaders are more concerned with *how things appear* than with *how things work*. Impressions mean

everything to the cheerleaders; they are part of the public relations staff whose job it is to put as good a face on the game as possible, but not actually to affect its outcome.

Again, the men of the New Testament were "not, like so many, peddlers of God's word; but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ" (2 Cor. 2:17). Peter directed the younger ministers to "feed the flock; care for it willingly, not grudgingly; not for what you will get out of it, [in other words, not for an ego trip] but because you are eager to serve the Lord. Don't be tyrants, but lead them by your good example" (1 Pet. 5:2-3 Living Bible).

*Coaches are essential; cheerleaders aren't.* A football team simply has to have coaching. A group of guys playing by themselves will never get past the sandlot league. Someone has to take charge and put together a winning machine.

Coaches are taken seriously by players, owners or school administrators, fans, even the opposition. (Did you ever notice that God's men are to be "well thought of by outsiders"? (1 Tim. 3:7). Coaches are interviewed by the sportswriters, invited to speak at the Rotary Club and the alumni association meeting. Everyone knows the strategic role they play.

But who ever interviews a cheerleader? Let's face it, cheerleaders are luxuries when it comes to winning football. It's nice to have them, and the roar from the stands may give the players a small psychological boost from time to time. But a disciplined team can win without a soul watching. They know that it's what happens down on the scrimmage line that counts, whether spectators are there to cheer or not. Noise is an effect, not a cause.

The sooner we rid ourselves of the *cheerleader mentality* and concentrate on the hard work of praying, thinking and coaching for the advancement of God's Kingdom, the sooner Satan will find himself backed up against his own goalposts. (And that's something to yell about!) ♡