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By Adelle Banks

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KANSAS CITY, Mo. (RNS)—Standing on the balcony of the headquarters of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, former pro-football player Harry Flaherty relished the view directly across Interstate 70 of the huge stadiums for the baseball and football teams of this Midwestern city.

On a tour of the renovated home office during a 50th anniversary weekend for the sports ministry, the 42-year-old recalled the 16-millimeter film he watched in his first year of college, when he first heard legendary coach Tom Landry promote the fellowship.

Years later, after Flaherty eventually played under Landry as a Dallas Cowboy in the 1980s, he now directs the sports ministry's activities in New York City and New Jersey. He oversees the “huddles” that meet in that area's schools, which have grown from 20 in 1995 to 120 today.

Professional athletes such as Bill Krisher helped the FCA gain instant credibility in the 1950s.

“There are huddle coaches now who were FCA kids in junior high and high school,” he said. “They're coaching. They're saying, 'Hey I want to be involved.'”

The ministry, which harnessed the popularity of sports celebrities to its particular interest in Christian conversion, now grows through the influence of student leaders on campuses and former athletes who advise them.

More than 50 years ago, Oklahoma college student Don McClanen started collecting newspaper clippings of professional athletes who spoke publicly about their Christian faith. He later contacted some of those featured to help him start his ministry.

“I was just young enough, foolish enough and adventurous enough to do it and I think God honored that,” McClanen said.

Carl Erskine, a Brooklyn Dodgers pitcher, was one of those athletes McClanen contacted who became a speaker for the organization McClanen founded in 1954.

On a stage decorated with balls, racquets and other standard sports

equipment, the former pitcher stood before many former coaches and athletes at a recent anniversary dinner and congratulated the organization's leaders for following Jesus' example by speaking in parables, albeit ones tinged with sports.

"FCA is right where we live," Erskine said. "That's, I think, why FCA has tapped into so many young people, coaches and families."

Sports terminology is rife throughout the evangelical Christian organization. "God's Playbook" is the title of the ministry's New International Version edition of the Bible. Camps long have been known as "a week of inspiration and perspiration."

Part of the group's "Competitor's Creed" reads: "My sweat is an offering to my Master. My soreness is a sacrifice to my Savior."

The ministry, which began in the same year as Sports Illustrated, grew from citywide rallies to summer camps to weekly and biweekly gatherings on campuses. Those "huddles," mostly on high school and college campuses, range from groups of about five at a rural school to gatherings of hundreds on campuses like the University of Florida and Clemson University.

One of the ministry's almost 8,000 huddles meets weekly in the portable classroom of Gaithersburg High School in Maryland that otherwise is used for an English class. Over a recent Wednesday lunch—two slices of pizza and a soda for two bucks—about 35 students listened to guest speaker Mark Haug, the high school pastor of a church from nearby Germantown, encourage them to inspire their school community.

Citing a statistic that most people become Christians by age 18, Haug said: "You guys on the high school campus are the last bastion of influence. ... This is the last great mission field."

Christine Pettit, a sophomore tennis player who helps lead the huddle, said she chose this group over other student leadership roles because she wants to have that kind of effect on her peers.

“I'm just really interested in having everyone know the peace that I feel because of Christ and salvation,” said Pettit, who attends a non-denominational church.

Pettit's pleased with the numbers who attend, an increase from the dozen or so who took part last year.

“I think that the pizza has been a good way for kids to come,” she said.

The food offered by FCA on a different level was part of the initial attraction for the group's current president. Dal Shealy recalled as a young high school coach how he saw a sign for a free FCA breakfast at a meeting of the American Football Coaches Association.

“I didn't understand anything about FCA but I understood 'breakfast' and 'free,” he told the anniversary dinner crowd.

The breakfast in the 1960s led to an FCA camp experience, which helped him improve his personal faith life with prayer and Bible study.

After leaving his job as head football coach at the University of Richmond in Virginia, he's led the organization for 12 years, presiding over a staff that now numbers more than 600.

Despite the current growth, the ministry has had challenges over the years. Shealy acknowledges that the group once had more of a competitive spirit with other sports ministries. Now, he says, he meets biannually with leaders of other evangelical ministries so they can all be on “team Jesus Christ.”

James Mathisen, co-author of “Muscular Christianity: Evangelical

Protestants and the Development of American Sport,” said the group was less successful in the late 1980s and early 1990s but has rebounded since then.

“They took on issues of delinquency and drugs,” said Mathisen, a sociology professor at Wheaton College in Illinois. “They project now a somewhat more high-profile social consciousness. Their commitments are not just conversion and evangelism but they're into ... a little bit more holistic sense of involvement.”

Beyond the weekly Bible-based huddles, the ministry has brought speakers into schools for more secular talks under the “One Way 2 Play Drug Free” program, which seeks written commitments from students to abstain from drugs and alcohol.

In its early years, the ministry shunned an offer for significant financial support if it changed “Christian” in its name to “Religious.” More recently, Shealy said, the group declined \$100,000 from a major beer company that wanted it to focus on responsible drinking rather than total abstention.

“I say this: The Fellowship of Christian Athletes. If you take Christ out, what do you have? Fellowship of I-A-N athletes-I am nothing,” he said. “We don't want to be nothing. We want to be something because we are Christ-centered.”

As the group sticks to its strict Christian principles, its leaders remain interested in finding new ways to expand their efforts.

“We're going to have to change with society,” said Nelson Price, president of FCA's board of trustees. “So much of sports now is outside of schools. ... We're diversifying, going into such things as motocross, lacrosse, skiing, soccer.”

Among the 600 or so coaches, regional representatives and alumni

gathered for the anniversary weekend—part family reunion, part pep rally for the future—were representatives of more than one generation of involvement with the ministry.

Bible teacher Anne Graham Lotz, the daughter of evangelist Billy Graham, met her husband at an FCA camp and her daughter, in turn, met her husband at a Baylor University FCA group. The younger family members help lead FCA-sponsored activities at a Raleigh, N.C., high school.

“I wouldn't be Anne Graham Lotz if it wasn't for FCA,” said Lotz, whose husband Danny is an FCA trustee board member.

Lotz continues to admire the way the ministry delivers a Christian message to the nation's youth.

“They don't hear about it at home,” she said. “They don't hear about it on the street and FCA is right there in the schools and using their peers that they look up to to tell them about Jesus.”

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