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By Art Stricklin

Baptist Press

HOUSTON (BP)—Michael Irvin, the self-styled playmaker during his Dallas Cowboys days, is still very much at home at the Super Bowl.

Strolling the sidelines at Super Bowl XXXVIII's Media Day at Houston's Reliant Stadium, Irvin was chatting with players and kidding around with his former teammate Deion Sanders. And he was wearing his latest stylish suit, akin to the times he once wore a full-length mink coat during his playing days.

But Irvin, now a commentator for ESPN-TV, is making bigger and more eternally important plays than the many touchdowns and taunts he dished out during his decade-plus career as a Cowboys wide receiver.

He is now more than happy to talk about his new, full-time career and his maturing faith in Jesus Christ which lifted him from a much-publicized career marked by drugs, adultery and other troubles.

Former
Dallas
Cowboy
Michael
Irvin devotes
his time now
to his job as
an ESPN
commentator
and to
sharing his
Christian
faith.

The new Michael Irvin story is every bit as compelling as the tale of his rise from south Florida poverty to a national championship at the University of Miami, where he met his wife Sandy, to an All-Pro career in the NFL.

“Sometimes, we all have problems and they can get overwhelming, but when God saves us, we think about all he has brought us through and it's just amazing,” Irvin said.

“You might say I should hide my problems, but I just want to spread the word about how good Jesus is to me. It's his hand who brought me through all this.”

This is the first Super Bowl Irvin has attended as a member of the media after earning three championship rings with the Cowboys.

His return to the super stage in Houston still brings back great memories, he said.

“When I think back to my football career, all my best memories are of the

Super Bowl,” Irvin said.

“I still remember the first Super Bowl I played in 1992. Emmitt Smith and I went on the field together for the warm-ups and when we saw those 93,000 people out there and felt the energy, I just said, 'Wow.' My knees were shaking and I was scared.”

After having his career cut short by a neck injury in 2000, Irvin said he finally turned his life over to Christ in early 2001, got into a Dallas church where he was discipled by his pastor and now has an accountability group with fellow believer Sanders.

“We talk to each other all the time, we're always leaving Bible verses on each other's cell phone and encouraging one another to do good,” Irvin said.

Sanders, in town to do the Sunday pre-game show for CBS, said his new spiritual accountability with Irvin also has helped greatly in his own growing faith.

“He's my best friend. We'll talk three-four times a day and then go out for dinner at night. We lift each other up, encourage and hold each other accountable,” Sanders said.

Irvin regrets that most fans outside of Dallas only remember the dark days when he landed on the wrong side of the law, but today's NFL players are eager to hear how he conquered the many demons in his life through faith in Christ.

“A lot of times I'll talk with players after the (ESPN) cameras are shut off and I'll be able to minister to them. They all know I went through the ups and downs,” Irvin said. “I did almost every bad thing you could do, but it's through the power of God I can live this life.”

He recently has begun to give his testimony to church groups or those Christian athletes interested in learning his new life story.

“I know one player, as soon as I saw him, he wanted to know what was happening,”

Irvin said. “As Christians, I think we have a heavy responsibility to witness to (God's) power.”

Irvin still lives in the Dallas area where he enjoys watching his young son play football.

During the regular season, he flew constantly to wherever the ESPN crew was stationed that week and often would run into people in airports struggling to overcome the same problems he had faced.

“I talked with this lady for three hours about her son and the drinking problem he was facing. I know what God can do,” Irvin said, “because of what he did for me.”

Longtime Dallas Cowboys team chaplain John Weber was there for much of Irvin's stellar football career and said the former wide receiver's much-publicized struggles make him the perfect person to share with people he meets today in his media career.

“Michael lives in a world and meets people that I could not even comprehend,” Weber said. “I believe he is as secure in his faith as you or I would ever be and he has a great opportunity to share.

“Some people cannot look past the flashy Michael or the old Michael to see what he is today.”

Irvin said he doesn't glory in his past misdeeds, but doesn't shy away from them either if they can be used for the right purpose.

“I don't want people to forget my story and rob God of all his glory.”

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