

# The Playing Field

By Dan Schlafer

I grew up in the home of a Southern Baptist pastor and his classically-trained, symphony-loving wife. Consequently, rock and roll music didn't stand a snowball's chance in August in our house.

If you look up "VICTORIAN CONSERVATIVE" (yes, capital letters, underlined, decorated with glitter), you'll find a picture of my parents. That's not to infer that they weren't good people. They cared for, loved and nurtured their five children and strived to raise them in their own image, and the focus of this image was "all things spiritual." True to this notion, they tended to look down their noses with great disdain at the 1960's music scene. I witnessed several sermons warning the faithful flock about the danger and evil of swinging hips and that "Satanic beat."

Unbeknownst to them, I snuck a peek at The Beatles on "The Ed Sullivan Show" that life-changing Sunday evening in 1964. I was just in time to catch the "Yeah, yeah, yeah" from their performance of "She Loves You," barely audible over the hysterical voices of the screaming, love-sick girls. It didn't matter; I was hopelessly hooked from the first chord. But, I knew better than to ask if I could go to the record store. The only music played in our home included hymns, Bach, Beethoven and Mozart. To her credit, my mom taught us kids music theory and piano. At what she thought was the appropriate time, she asked each of us what instrument we wanted to play, going forward. "Electric guitar!" was my immediate and excited response to her query. Mom was not pleased with my answer. "No! You'll play the violin!" came the stern reply, explaining guitars were played in bars where people smoke and drink.

However, being the resourceful child they had raised, I pocketed some of my lawn-mowing cash and rode my bike to the local drug store to procure (without permission) the next best thing—a small transistor radio and ear plug, and, undetected by the powers that be, I hid it under my pillow each night to get my rock 'n' roll fix. To this day, I still have that little radio—my one-time window to the rock 'n' roll airwaves coming into my Knoxville bedroom from the outside world.

As for sports, football was tolerated, but just barely. In high school, I started on the varsity squad, and on the occasion that

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my father would pick me up from practice, he would sometimes hear the profanity-laden commands from the coaching staff. It may have been meant to discipline and “encourage” me and my teammates, but it also reinforced my father’s negative opinion of the “worldliness” of the environment. Consequently, he was hardly ever present in the stands to see my performance on the field. Although I didn’t quite understand his stand on football and music, I tried to do my best on the field and I continued to explore the world of music that was evolving during the late ’60s.

I loved the Beatles, but when I first heard the harmonies created by Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young—along with their political activism—their music grabbed my soul and would not let go. I longed to experience them live, but I may as have well had yearned for a round trip to the moon.

With five kids on a pastor’s salary, we had very little money in my home. My mom taught occasional piano lessons to kids in the neighborhood to help make ends meet and I kicked in lawn-mowing money to help out (which justified my aforementioned purchase, at least in my mind). Consequently, going to a live concert wasn’t even on the radar screen; even if the resources had been there, the permission to attend would never have been. What’s more, I knew better than to ask.

After I graduated from high school, I was finally free to continue my love for football and music. Plus, my ability on the field earned me a scholarship to a small, Christian college. I was determined to share both of these inter-

ests with others. My freshman year was filled with football and music; I joined a folk-rock band (*Contents Under Pressure*—see *ePublisher’s* column, page 2) and we concentrated on CSN&Y-type harmonies, covering some of their songs and writing our own. Ironically, the church choirs of my youth—plus my mother’s music theory lessons—gave me a foundation for lead and harmony vocals. And,

I even contributed violin on several of our songs (although my bandmates insisted on calling it “a fiddle”). What may have seemed like a contrast between playing football and playing music was actually more similar than not; both meant learning how to work with others as a unified force to achieve a common goal. Meanwhile, education-wise, I studied to be a coach...just in case our band fell short of a record deal.

My sophomore year, our band began gaining popularity, but I was sidelined on the football field. It was a devastating blow, but I could hear my father’s words echoing in my head to “Be the best you can be.” I was determined to follow that advice—just not necessarily in the “field” he had in mind. After I graduated from college, the reality that there would be no recording contract, nor NFL offers led me to pursue my “third” dream—that of being a coach and mentoring young players.

One of my first opportunities came in an unusual package—being a teacher and head coach of Tennessee School for the Deaf in Knoxville. I knew it would be a challenge—I had always played and coached using ver-

bal snaps and play calls. But, as my father would have said, the greater the challenge, the greater the reward. I was able to coach two deaf national champion runner-up teams, and in 1980, I was named *National Deaf Prep Football Coach of the Year* by *The Deaf American Magazine*. More importantly, some of my players went on to greater things. One of them, born with birth defects and one leg shorter than the other, was an outstanding kicker, and he went on to become a high school All-American, something that (in addition to being on stage with CSN&Y) I only dreamed about.

That job led to yet another head coaching position—at Knoxville Catholic High School. Eventually, I went back to school and got my Masters and accepted the principal’s job at Tellico Plains High School. I served there for ten years, before moving into the administrative side, as Federal Programs Director for the Monroe County School System and then 9th District Board of Education Rep for the Cumberland County School System. But, I never lost my passion for the band that inspired me so much during my college years.

In 1987, just as I was completing a graduate degree at the University of Tennessee, my wife, knowing my passion for their music, bought two tickets to a Crosby, Stills and Nash concert at the Starwood Amphitheater in Nashville as a graduation present. I was beyond elated! As the show began, I couldn’t control the tears that flowed. Having been taught the scripture verse, “Ye have not because ye ask not,” after the show, we made a beeline to

stage left, on the slim chance that we might get a closer glimpse. While waiting outside the dressing room door, a young man and his lady exited. When I asked if he had met the band, he affirmed that he had and gave me his backstage pass. A minute later, I was getting David Crosby’s autograph. Graham Nash’s signature followed with a friendly chat about my work as a high school football coach. They seemed pleased that their music was appreciated by a high school coach. I was simply pleased that they were pleased.

The following year, once again after one of their concerts, I managed to get backstage again. “Hey, it’s the high school coach!” Graham shouted when he saw me. After

all my college band’s performances of “Suite: Judy Blue Eyes” (and occasionally “*Not So Sweet Judy Blue Eyes*”), I felt honored that he remembered me. Then, a few years later, the perfect and unexpected ending to a Graham Nash concert came after his final encore, when Graham walked to the edge of the stage, bent down and gave me his pick!

Although my father passed away in 1981 and my mother’s death would follow three years later, they were there to see me get the *Coach of the Year* award in 1980. However, even then, he was sparse with his praise and acceptance of my chosen field. I know that it’s not uncommon for father-son relationships to be tenuous or even difficult. I also know that there’s always the aspect of the son wanting to live up to the “legend” of his father...or his father’s expectations. I would have liked to say that my father’s expectations—or at

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least what I thought my father's expectations were for me—were never a factor in my life and career, but my father was bigger than life. Yes, he was removed from one of his pulpits when I was a child, and I never quite understood how someone with as big a presence as my father could have ever gotten thrown out of his church. In later years, I learned that he was dismissed from his pastorate—and run out of town—because of his stance (and sermons) on advancing the cause of civil rights in our little Alabama church...in the early '60s. And, that was followed up by a cross burning in our front yard.

So, it's no wonder his legacy hung over my life. I vividly remember his impact on his congregation, and how his words and actions dramatically changed lives, time and time again. But, it finally dawned on me; it's not the awards or the trophies on your shelf that make for a successful life. Rather, what's the most important are the lives that are affected and changed by your words, lessons, and actions. I realized that, just as the music of Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young made a dramatic impact on my young life, and my father's pastoring made a lasting impression on so many of his parishioners, I had done more with my life than just win games and coach winning teams. Some of my players and students have gone on to change the lives of their own students, clients and patients. These not only include football coaches in their own right, but also military officers, law enforcement detectives, medical doctors, attorneys, Homeland Security agents, educators, mayors, school board members,

missionaries, small business owners, and even farmers, those who raise the very food we eat to survive—the ultimate harvester.

Maybe my dad would have preferred for me to be a minister, but we are called to be our own person. I'm sure my dad would be okay with me referencing Romans 12:6: *"We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us."* And though my father might argue that there's no mention of football or rock 'n' roll in either the New or Old Testament, I would counter with the psalmist's reference to the fruits of our labor.

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y 'Yeah,  
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don't say 'Yeah, yeah, yeah!'"

If that happens, I can only hope there's an iPad somewhere around, so I can pull up this article as a sort of explanation. That's the best I can do as I beg for mercy...and understanding.

**Dan Schlafer** has been an educator, coach and administrator. During his coaching career, Dan earned Coach of the Year honors thirteen times and while at Tennessee School for the Deaf, he coached two deaf national champion runner-up teams. As a high school principal, Dan was named Principal of the Year in (2002-2003) by The Tennessee Secondary School Athletic Association, and enshrined in the Tennessee Secondary School Athletic Association Hall of Fame.

"What's the meaning of this, young man? And don't say 'Yeah, yeah, yeah'!"

