

PRAISE FOR A *GRAND SLAM FOR GOD*

“Every kid has athletic aspirations—dreams of being the one that helps their team win it all. Fr. Burke Masters describes in *A Grand Slam for God* how he got that moment in college. As you discover through Fr. Burke’s life story, Christ revealed to him that while those particular moments are great, they are not the eternal reward our hearts desire. Through the grace of many other ‘grand slam’ moments in his life—from a religious sister giving him homework to read the Gospel of Matthew, to finding a deep love for the Eucharist after accidentally receiving his First Communion, to unthinkable family tragedy, to the miraculous healing of a little girl, and finally culminating to a full circle moment in 2016—Fr. Burke’s life shows us that certain people enter our lives and certain events can happen that point us back to our eternal reward, our eternal grand slam.”

—Trevor Williams, MLB pitcher, Washington Nationals

“*A Grand Slam for God* is a highly inspiring and encouraging story that will evoke much pondering in your own life. Through honesty, engaging witness, and vulnerability, Fr. Burke reveals that God honors and authors the deepest desires of our heart. In both sorrow and triumph, all things work for good according to his will. You will love this book!”

—Sr. Miriam James Heidland, SOLT, speaker and author

“Every priest has a vocation story, a story of God’s grace and a man’s cooperation with that grace. As Bishop of Joliet, I had the privilege of ministering with Fr. Burke for four years. I got to know him well, but not until reading *A Grand Slam for God* did I learn the full interior history of his vocation to the priesthood. Surprised by God at every turn, Fr. Burke listened deeply to the interior movements of the Holy Spirit and joyfully accepted God’s call to the priesthood. This book will be an inspiration to young men considering a priestly vocation—but it will also be a reminder for all of us to discover anew the grace that accompanies God’s call in each of our lives. It is a reminder to give thanks for the blessings God showers down upon us.”

—Archbishop J. Peter Sartain, Archbishop Emeritus of Seattle

“Fr. Burke is a calm listener who is there for everyone and always available. He is an old-school priest and friend, a trusted member within the clubhouse, and a pretty good ballplayer too. You will enjoy this book about his amazing life story.”

—Joe Maddon, former MLB manager and coauthor of *The Book of Joe*

“Early on in my friendship with Fr. Burke, I had the opportunity to witness a conversation between him and Mike Martin, the winningest coach in college baseball history. They reminisced about that electrifying moment for Burke (his grand slam) and the agonizing effect for Coach Martin when his team was knocked out of the World Series. By the end of the conversation, they were both speaking joyfully about their fulfillment in their faith in Jesus Christ. I trust you will love reading this inspiring story of a man who hungered for greatness and was surprised where he found it.”

—Dr. Bob Schuchts, author of *Be Healed*

“This book has it all: a captivating tale of a hometown boy who makes it big, but not at all in the way he expected. The true story of Fr. Burke Masters’ unexpected and amazing trajectory from high school star athlete to college baseball superstar to the Catholic priesthood is filled with natural-born talent, hard work, true grit, determination, and trust in God’s loving providence, with plenty of triumphs, surprises, and unexpected bumps in the road along the way. I loved it.”

—Patrick Madrid, host of the daily *Patrick Madrid Show* on Relevant Radio

“I encourage anyone and everyone that likes baseball to read this incredible book written by Fr. Burke. He uses his own experiences with failure and success in the great sport of baseball to teach us about who we are and who God is. This book will give us the hope, courage, and inspiration to be all that God has created us to be. A definite must read!”

—Deacon Darrell Miller, former California Angels baseball player (1979–1989)

“Fr. Burke Masters’ autobiography *A Grand Slam for God* is the detailed journey of his conversion from seeking his will to seeking God’s will. He beautifully tells the story of how a college baseball star gave up the tools of the game in order to labor in the Lord’s vineyard as a priest. It is truly an inspired tale for everyone, as at the heart of this story we hear one man’s account of radically falling in love with Jesus Christ. Enjoy!”

—Bishop James S. Wall, Diocese of Gallup

“Few subjects are of more compelling interest than sport and religion. The narrative to which we are introduced in *A Grand Slam for God* involves both of them. It’s a story so fresh, so bold and disarmingly honest, it captures and holds the reader’s attention from first page to last. Not only is it a great read, it’s also an instructive pointer to what St. John Paul II referred to once, when speaking to a group of highly successful sportsmen and athletes, as ‘that final target, that “goal” which is the true and ultimate destiny of life.’”

—Fr. Paul Murray, OP, author and international speaker

**A GRAND
SLAM FOR
GOD**

FOREWORD BY MIKE SWEENEY **FR. BURKE MASTERS**

**A GRAND
SLAM FOR
GOD**

A JOURNEY
FROM
BASEBALL
STAR TO
CATHOLIC
PRIEST

WORD  on FIRE.

Published by Word on Fire,
Elk Grove Village, IL 60007
© 2023 by Burke Masters
Printed in the United States of America
All rights reserved

Cover design, typesetting, and interior art direction by Nicolas Fredrickson,
Clark Kenyon, and Rozann Lee. Cover photo courtesy of the Knights of
Columbus and Spirit Juice Studios.

Scripture excerpts are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible:
Catholic Edition (copyright © 1989, 1993), used by permission of the
National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.
All rights reserved worldwide.

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever
without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations in critical
articles or reviews. For more information, contact Word on Fire Catholic
Ministries, PO Box 97330, Washington, DC 20090-7330
or email contact@wordonfire.org.

First printing, August 2023

ISBN: 978-1-68578-993-0

Library of Congress Control Number: 2022943338

CONTENTS

Foreword: Mike Sweeney	ix
Preface	xiii
Acknowledgments	xv
Chapter One: A Perfect Game Plan	i
Chapter Two: Meeting Jesus	13
Chapter Three: A Change of Plans	25
Chapter Four: A Divided Heart	41
Chapter Five: The Gift of the Red Bird	55
Chapter Six: Father What-a-Waste!	72
Chapter Seven: A Friend of Jesús	84
Chapter Eight: Living in the Moment	94
Chapter Nine: Searching for My Identity	103
Chapter Ten: A Grand Slam for God	120
Questions for Reflection and Discussion	134

FOREWORD

Mike Sweeney

I will never forget the evening of June 17, 1994. I was a twenty-one-year-old catcher from Southern California playing Minor League Baseball for the Rockford Royals, a Single-A affiliate of the Kansas City Royals. I was having the best season of my young career, hitting well over .300 while helping lead my team to a league-leading record. It was a typical hot and humid Midwest day, and my teammates and I were preparing to play a Friday night road game against the Kane County Cougars, a Single-A affiliate of the Miami Marlins, in Geneva, Illinois. Although we were a short drive from the “MLB Cathedrals” Wrigley Field (Chicago Cubs) and Comiskey Park (Chicago White Sox), we felt like we were millions of miles away from living out our big league dreams. Although the odds of Minor League players making it to the big leagues are slim, the fans in attendance were about to watch a staggering twenty-one future Major League players that evening. What an atmosphere the spectators were able to take in for about a \$3 ticket stub.

Minor League Baseball is an absolute grind and could be accurately described as Major League Purgatory. The twelve-hour workdays at dilapidated Minor League stadiums were long and arduous. The 140 games in just 150 calendar days while staying at roach-infested, dumpy motels were unrelenting. Ten-hour bus

trips in a rectangular forty-foot salvage yard steel box on wheels filled with the stench of thirty athletes, greasy fast-food leftovers, and chain-smoking, coffee-drinking bus drivers were simply part of the job. On road trips, a tall cup of black coffee and a donut served as payment for the driver to take me and my Catholic teammates to Sunday Mass in the bus. To get to and from our home stadium in Rockford, two teammates and I pitched in \$100 each to purchase a 1978 Pontiac Grand Safari wagon—a mustard-colored, wood-paneled eyesore nicknamed “The Hooty.” Since we didn’t have enough money for registration, we took a black sharpie and changed the expiration month on the temporary document from 04/30/1994 to “09”/30/1994 to cover the season. Sorry Lord: this was Minor League Baseball, and I was simply trying to survive! These were the best and yet the worst times of my life.

Back to that muggy night game in June. In the top of the sixth inning, with the score knotted up at 3–3, the atmosphere grew tense and dark when the lights around the stadium suddenly turned off. A faulty transformer had blown a fuse, and a backup generator only powered some emergency lighting and televisions in the luxury suites. After about thirty minutes, I found myself down the third-base line talking with two young boys sporting Little League uniforms who begged for baseballs from our team ballbag. I promised them that if they came back with two hot dogs, they would each get an official autographed team baseball. The exchange left both of us feeling like winners. As I sat in the bullpen eating ballpark “filet mignon” on a bun, my attention was drawn to the illuminated suite directly behind home plate. With the stadium so dark, its large television shined like the North Star, and I saw a silhouette of one of the Kane County managers frantically pacing back and forth in front of the TV. Curious about what was causing the stir, I walked up into our clubhouse, where all my teammates were glued to the television. They briefed me that the scene before our eyes—a white 1993 Ford Bronco with O.J. Simpson in a slow-speed chase with the LAPD

on a California freeway—was being seen on almost every TV in the country. Eventually, the lights of the stadium came back to life, and the game ended close to midnight due to the delays. It was just another crazy night of Minor League Baseball on the journey of making my big league dreams a reality.

Almost twenty years later, as a recently retired five-time MLB All-Star, I was attending a Catholic Athletes for Christ (CAC) men's retreat in Malibu, California. CAC is a ministry that brings the Gospel of Jesus Christ and his Holy Catholic Church to the world through athletics. They host retreats and camps, help to provide Mass every Sunday during the NFL and MLB seasons, and empower Catholic athletes ("Cathletes") around the world to become the saints that God has called them to be. While on this life-changing retreat with Hall of Famers Mike Piazza, Vin Scully, Vince Coleman, and Trevor Hoffman, I was blessed to hear a Catholic priest named Fr. Burke Masters, known as "The Baseball Priest," share his testimony. This handsome priest, the vocation director in Joliet, IL, embodied St. Francis of Assisi's gentleness, St. Paul's zeal, and St. Dominic's desire to set the world on fire for Jesus. After hearing him speak, most of the men in attendance were moved to tears, and many were ready to join the seminary. When the standing ovation ended, I introduced myself to this humble man of God, and after about five minutes, I realized that I would have a friend in him for the rest of my life. While in conversation, I smiled in disbelief when he mentioned working in management in 1994 with the Kane County Cougars. We almost fell over laughing when we realized that I was the player down the third-base line exchanging hot dogs for baseballs and he was the one pacing frantically in the luxury suite behind home plate on that crazy night when the lights went out in Geneva.

Little did I know then that this Minor League manager pacing in his team's suite had an amazing story and big league dreams of his own. He was already a local celebrity due to his athletic greatness, humble demeanor, leadership ability, and

strong family name. As a gifted and highly touted star athlete at one of the Joliet parochial high schools, he was on the fast track to greatness. He was a blue chip recruit out of high school and a four-year starter at an SEC powerhouse university, and he played professionally with a Chicago White Sox affiliate. After his dreams of playing in the MLB came to an end, he had ambitions of making it as a general manager. Besides being an incredible athlete, he was a number-crunching, mathematical genius on track to be a “Moneyball” type of leader. Around this time, he was also falling in love with God. This love grew to a point where he gave up everything, including his baseball dreams, to honor it, becoming a consecrated soldier for the Church as a priest. Despite never playing in the Major Leagues, his story is more powerful than that of any member of the Hall of Fame in Cooperstown.

Since meeting Fr. Burke almost ten years ago, he has become a brother, a best friend, and even the godfather of our sixth child, who was named after this heroic priest that my family and I love. The home run-hitting slugger from Joliet, IL, has become a power hitter for Christ. He has replaced his baseball uniform with a black cassock and a Roman collar, his bat with a rosary, and his briefcase with a Mass kit.

The story you’re about to read is similar to the one I heard the night I met Fr. Burke Masters at the retreat in California. I think you’ll agree that he has truly hit a “Grand Slam for God.”

PREFACE

I had the incredible opportunity to walk the Camino de Santiago de Compostela in Spain from April 14 to May 17, 2022, with my friends Rick, Ed, Joe, Mark, Tom, Mike, and Mike. We tallied 1.2 million steps over the thirty-four days of walking. It was one of the most exhilarating, challenging, and life-changing experiences of my life.

We started in Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port, France. We averaged just over fifteen miles per day. Along the way, we would pray, converse with strangers, talk with each other, and at times walk in silence.

It was interesting how the Camino transformed us. The first two weeks, we were focused on getting to the next town. Little by little, we began to enjoy the scenery and the people along the way. The goal came to be less about the destination and more about the journey. We began to enjoy the people and the scenery much more.

Life is like the Camino. Hopefully we learn that it's not just about getting to the next destination, but it's about the journey. This book is about my journey through life. My life did not turn out like I thought it would. I thank God that his plans for me were different than mine. Hopefully reading about my story will help you reflect on your Camino of life. Enjoy the journey. *Buen Camino!*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to first thank God for creating me, sustaining me, and loving me. I am grateful for all the experiences of my life, even the ones that I didn't appreciate when they were happening to me. I thank my parents, Tod and Janet, for their love and encouragement. They made me believe that anything is possible if I put my mind to it. I also thank my brothers, Brock and Blaine, for their constant and abiding friendship. Thank you to my niece Mackenzie, who helped me get this project from my mind onto paper.

Thank you to all who have shaped me with your amazing love and support over the years. I feel so blessed with the most incredible family and friends. There are so many of you that I am afraid to leave someone out if I tried to list you all.

Thank you to Bert Ghezzi and Joe Durepos, who believed in me and in this book enough to see it to publication.

Finally, I would like to place this book under the patronage of St. John Vianney, the patron saint of priests, whose story has always inspired me.

CHAPTER ONE

A PERFECT GAME PLAN

The highlight of my baseball career at Mississippi State occurred on May 26, 1990, at a game during the regional tournament to qualify for the College World Series in Omaha, Nebraska. And that special experience would be life changing for me.

I was in the zone, which means that the game slows down to the point that you feel like you are in total control. In that tournament, I was in the zone more than ever before in my athletic career. Our first game was against Brigham Young. I had four hits in five at bats, and we won 16-5. The next night we played the University of Illinois. Highly motivated playing against a home state team, I went two for three. We won the game 5-3. That victory put us in the winner's bracket in the double-elimination tournament.

In the next game we played a Florida State team that was ranked first or second in the nation most of the year. My grandparents and my brother Blaine and his wife were in the stands. My confidence level was at a high that I'd never experienced. The first five times up to bat I got base hits. The baseball looked like a balloon in slow motion. It was saying "Here! Hit me!"

I came up in the top of the ninth inning, down by a run with the bases loaded. The stadium buzzed with anticipation. Florida State had their best pitcher on the mound, there was one out,

and I worked the count to three and one. In the box I thought, “Take a pitch; if he walks you, the game is tied.”

“What are you doing?” my inner voice retorted. I was seeing the ball so well. I took my time, stepped out of the box, and had this internal conversation. “If he throws you a strike, just swing at it; you’re on fire.” So that’s what I did. With the count at three and one, he had to throw a strike. He threw a fastball—probably 93 mph—but it looked like it was moving in slow motion. I simply reacted and swung the bat effortlessly, and the ball jumped off the bat so perfectly that I didn’t even feel it.

In the past, whenever I hit a home run, the ball would barely clear the fence. I’d take off running, thinking it would just be a double. But as soon as I hit this one, I knew that it was gone. It cleared the first two rows of pick-up trucks in the famous lot nicknamed the “Left Field Lounge.” The left fielder took a step, stopped, and slumped his head into his chest. I dropped the bat and looked at my teammates in the first base dugout. They all raised their hands in excitement. The whole stadium exploded. “A grand slam for Masters! A grand slam for Masters!” Jim Ellis, our play-by-play radio announcer, exclaimed. “This crowd is berserk!”*

I never showed emotion when I was playing because Dad taught us to play on an even keel. He said, “If I show up in the last inning, I better not be able to tell from your face if you are zero-for-four or four-for-four. You better not be pouting, or you better not be too high.” So that’s how I always played, even though I felt a thrill of excitement deep down. But this time, as I ran the bases, I couldn’t hold it in. I raised my arms up in the air as I was rounding third base and all my teammates were jumping up and down at home plate. The roar of the crowd was deafening. I will never forget that moment as long as I live. I knew something special had just happened.

* You can watch Burke’s life-changing home run on YouTube. Search for “Burke Masters grand slam.”

We still had to hold them for three more outs to win the game, as we were the visitors for this tournament game even though we were playing at home. I recorded all three assists in the bottom of the ninth inning with a level of adrenaline I seldom experienced. After the final out, my brother Blaine jumped the fence and celebrated with us on the pitcher's mound. We had not yet won the tournament, but we were in the driver's seat.

The grand slam sealed my decision to live baseball and make it my career. I believed I was on my way to the Major Leagues—a perfect game plan. Little did I know that I was really on my way to becoming the Baseball Priest.

* * *

Being athletic was an important value in our family. Both my parents had been athletes, and sports were in our blood. Even as kids, my older brothers Brock and Blaine were good athletes. But I was clumsy and uncoordinated and not very good at any game. It seemed that I couldn't walk across the street without falling over myself. Dad once told Mom, while watching me run, "It's a good thing the other two are athletes because God knows Burke will never be one."

Awkward as I was, I still tried to keep pace with Brock and Blaine. And what they called "character building" I called "torture." We fought, and when we fought, we fought hard. Did they go easy on me because I was the smallest kid in our family and on our block? No, they did not. Brock was older by seven years and Blaine by almost three, and there was no playing the youngest card with them. It was either keep up or sit out, and I was not about to sit out. I had inherited a strong Masters' trait: stubbornness. When I complained to my parents, they reminded me, "If you want to play with them, you either play by their rules or you don't play at all." So I decided to play, and I struggled to improve and match their skills. It was not easy though. My temper

and my clumsiness only spurred my brothers to tease me even more. It felt like their favorite pastime was to get me riled up.

During the winters in our first house, Dad would build an ice rink for us in the backyard. He nailed two-by-sixes together, draped a tarp across that frame, and filled it with water to freeze. Hockey was not my strong suit. Think about it: if I couldn't walk on flat ground without falling over, there was no way I could stay standing on ice, even with the assistance of double-runner skates. With my temper and my drive to keep up with my brothers as my fuel, I usually laid sprawled out on the ice grasping for their ankles to trip them as they skated circles around me. I just wanted to be with my brothers and prove that I could compete with them. It was my way of staying in the game.

I loved my brothers. But I do not know if I could say that I loved them in the midst of the “torture” sessions. I would get so angry I would see red at times. But shortly after it was over, I forgave them, and we would start all over. Two of us were fine together—peaceful even—but add in the third and trouble would follow. They challenged me. They made me work. They “tortured” me, yes, but if any of the other kids on the block tried anything, they had my back. Only my brothers could give me a hard time.

I don't know if it was stubbornness and perfectionism or the desire to show my brothers I could do it, but as I grew older I could hold my own with them. I almost always lost, but I slowly started to get better. Little by little, I began to mature and become a better athlete—much to everyone's surprise.

* * *

We grew up in a happy household. Our first home was a very modest two-bedroom, one-bathroom home in Joliet, Illinois, which is about thirty miles southwest of Chicago. My brothers and I shared a bedroom with bunk beds and a trundle bed that would roll under the lower bunk. The neighborhood was full of

children, so there was always a game going on somewhere. When the weather was nice, we never wanted to be inside, so we usually played from sunrise to sundown. Mom made us stop for lunch, which we weren't too happy about because we just wanted to keep playing. In the evening, we would hear Dad's whistle and immediately drop what we were doing and run home. We knew that if he whistled and we didn't come, we would be in trouble. Dad was the disciplinarian. Mom was the nurturer.

When I turned five years old, we were getting too big to share the same room, so my parents bought a three-bedroom house just over a mile from our first home in Joliet. This house had a full basement, which we quickly fell in love with because we could keep playing sports regardless of the weather. Hockey nets, a pinball machine that Brock had won in a contest, and other games were set up down there right away. We continued to be a family that revolved around sports. Usually, whatever sport was in season we were playing, inside or outside. Our yard was always the neighborhood playground for baseball, basketball, tetherball, football—whatever we could do. The games kept us together and they kept us safe. Our parents always knew where we were because all they had to do was look out through the window that we had just broken.

When I was about ten years old, my family built a new house in Joliet. It was on a street that only had nine houses at the time. The neighborhood, surrounded by cornfields, eventually expanded to twelve houses. It was a community where everyone was welcome into one another's homes, making it a very happy place to grow up. Enough kids lived in the neighborhood to play pick-up baseball and basketball games. A dirt lot next to our house became the infield for our baseball diamond, and the yards of neighboring houses became the left, center, and right fields. Our house served as the clubhouse where drinks and food were always available. Baselines were soon visible from so much use.

Every day of the summer we were out there. The kids would just show up, divide into teams, and play the rest of the day. On rainy days, we would beg Mom to let us go out and practice our sliding in the mud. We would come in muddy head to toe and soaked to the bone, but we loved it. Mom really did not mind. She was the perfect mom for boys. If we could not be on our diamond due to the weather, we would play the APBA baseball dice game or the Strat-O-Matic board game.

If only two of us were available to play baseball outside, I stood in front of the garage, bat in hand, as my brother or neighbor pitched the ball as hard as they could. We always found a way to play, no matter what the circumstances were. We all improved our skills in these pick-up games. When we were not playing baseball, it was basketball or hockey. When we broke a window, Dad put in a new one. He always kept extra windows and lightbulbs in the house for that reason.

Much to my advantage, my brothers' torture paid off. They had pushed me so hard that by the time I entered organized baseball at age seven, I was one of the best players. I was always advanced for my age group, and the awkward, tripping-over-himself kid was long gone. We played in city baseball leagues over the summer and on school teams in the fall; winter was saved for basketball. My elementary school had baseball teams starting in the fifth grade, which Dad would sometimes help coach. We were undefeated in my eighth-grade year and went on to win the state championship.

In the final game of the tournament, I threw a no-hitter, which only added to our championship celebration. It seemed to me that my baseball career was going to hinge around being a pitcher, but I eventually transitioned to being an infielder. When I realized that, in college and beyond, pitchers only played every four or five games, I preferred to play every day as an infielder and hitter. However, the no-hitter was near perfection in that eighth-grade game, and perfection is what I desired.

My mom loved raising boys, and she understood boys well. She realized that we needed to play, get dirty, and expend energy—and she loved it. She would be the first one out there playing with us and going to our games. At least one of our parents would go to all our games, no matter where we were playing. I am not sure how they did it with the three of us. Sometimes Dad was coaching two of our teams during the same season. I am grateful that our parents were so involved, supportive, and interested in everything that we did. They encouraged us to do our best. They allowed us to fail in sports and to learn valuable lessons through those failures. They allowed us to live and were not overprotective. They were neither helicopter parents (those who hover over their children) nor Zamboni parents (those who clear the path before their children so they never can fall).

My parents allowed us to learn difficult life lessons, which I have come to genuinely appreciate as an adult. They gave us, as the saying goes, “enough rope with which to hang yourself.” They saw to it that we had a lot of freedom to make mistakes, but they wouldn’t let us crash and burn. Mom and Dad also taught us responsibility and perseverance. If we signed up for something, we had to finish it. For example, when I was in the third grade, the high school was performing the play *The Music Man*, and they needed children that could sing in a few scenes. I tried out and got selected. About a week into it, I decided I did not like it and did not want to go to all the practices. Mom said, “You committed to this, so you are going to finish it.” I did not like it at the time, but that lesson was really important. There are always things in life that you are not going to like, but you have to learn how to keep pushing forward.

Our parents saw to it that we had everything we needed to play hard and have fun, including their unceasing support. They knew the great lessons that we would learn from playing the games, negotiating our disagreements, using our imaginations, and working hard to achieve a dream. Other life lessons that

they taught us included respecting our elders—like one unhappy neighbor we had woken up with a baseball flying through his bedroom window—and being kind to everyone. Although we were not a church-going family, we were taught strong, old-fashioned morals, especially how to treat others fairly and charitably.

I believe that my brothers and I grew up in an idyllic home. My brothers would tell you the same thing today. Sure, we fought a lot, and our family was by no means perfect, but our parents loved us and treated us generously. However, our story really started back in 1955 in Pinckneyville, a small farming community in southern Illinois, where our parents met.

* * *

Tod Masters' mother, Isabelle, was a schoolteacher and his father, Vernon, was a mechanic and coal miner. They encouraged their three sons to get a good education so that they wouldn't have to work manual labor their entire lives like their father had. Tod's mother was very involved in the United Church of Christ, playing the organ there for more than thirty years, and his father would occasionally attend. They raised their boys with strong discipline and encouraged them not only in their studies but also their athletic endeavors.

Tod excelled in basketball and baseball from a very young age. Pinckneyville High School, even though a very small school in a town of about three thousand people, was known far and wide for its basketball. Tod and all the young boys around town dreamed that they could play for the high school team. During his junior year at Pinckneyville High School, at the most important game of his high school athletic career, Tod met a young freshman named Janet Millikin. That night, Tod told his mother that he had met his future wife.

Janet was a beautiful young girl from Rice, a small farming community about nine miles north of Pinckneyville. Her parents, Frances and Charles, raised their five children with a strict

upbringing in the Southern Baptist Church. Janet, the youngest child, was an athlete like Tod. Tod and Janet were both raised in strict Christian homes with strong moral teachings. Both families expected that their children would find a good Protestant to marry one day. Grandpa Charlie was happy that Janet found Tod. He loved that he was both a good basketball player and a Christian.

Tod and Janet dated through their high school years. They both knew that one day they would marry. Even though women were not encouraged to play sports as they are today, Janet played half-court basketball and enjoyed practicing with her older brother Tom, who was a basketball standout as well. Tod received a scholarship to play at Mississippi State University. He did not like being so far from Janet, but he wanted to pursue his dream of playing basketball at the college level.

Tod played for a great team at MSU, one that was ranked nationally. However, he did not like the way black people were treated in the South. And he began to miss Janet. After his second year of college, Tod had had enough and came home to Pinckneyville to stay. He began working at the family service station. Soon he became an excellent mechanic like his father. He earned the nickname “Doc” for his ability to fix cars. He had written letters to Janet during his time at MSU, so when he came back, they happily continued to date.

Tod and Janet were married on March 29, 1959, in the United Church of Christ. They began their married life in Pinckneyville and soon welcomed my oldest brother, Brock. Tod and Janet had always wanted to have a large family, and they were ecstatic when they became pregnant again in 1961. Janet always said that she only wanted boys. She loved sports and always felt comfortable doing all the things that boys did. She got her wish of only having boys, but it was not easy. Their second pregnancy ended with a stillborn baby boy that they named Michael. They never really talked about it much, but I know it was very hard on Mom.

My brother Blaine was born in 1964. He was a healthy baby boy that brought great joy back into the household. After my birth on December 17, 1966, Mom lost a lot of calcium. She had other physical complications, resulting in a hysterectomy. She would never be able to have more children, which was exceedingly difficult for her. One way or another, our family was complete. Four boys—three on earth and one with God in heaven.

Meanwhile, work was scarce in Pinckneyville, so Dad began looking for work outside the area in order to support his new family. He found it in Joliet, Illinois, eventually meeting up with a friend who wanted to go into business with him. They purchased their first Shell service station, where Dad worked as a mechanic. As business grew, they eventually bought another station in town. Life was busy for the new Masters family.

Both Dad and Mom had grown up in strong religious families. They had gone to church just about every Wednesday and Sunday. However, when they moved to Joliet, they fell out of practice. Maybe it was because they felt that their parents forced religion on them or because Dad's heavy work schedule often had him working seven days a week. Whatever the reason, they stopped going to church. They lost themselves in making a living and raising a family. But we always attended church when we visited my grandparents, which was once or twice a year.

I also remember going to Mass on special occasions with my Aunt Judi Masters, a cradle Catholic, who had married my dad's brother, Terry. They lived near us in Joliet and eventually moved across the street from us. Aunt Judi was the only Catholic in our family for many years. She raised their two boys, my cousins Mark and Michael, in the Catholic Church.

Throughout my childhood, religion was not a priority for our family, even though faith was especially important for my grandparents. I vaguely remember praying before Mom put us to bed. Above our beds hung a picture of a man steering a boat with Jesus behind him and guiding him. And we had on our coffee table

a Bible that never was opened. I did not feel close to God at all in those early years. I did not understand what religion was all about, so I didn't pay much attention to it.

My brothers and I didn't grow up in a faith-filled environment. I see families today who teach their children to pray and who are at church weekly or even daily. They grow up with an intimate relationship with Jesus, which I never had. I do not begrudge my parents for it because it all worked out in the end for me. My lack of formation in the faith as a child could have pushed me to search for it later in life. But God is providential and cares for us every step of the way, even when we do not realize it. In my childhood, God was some distant entity that was important to my aunt and my grandmothers, but not to my immediate family. But at that point in my life, my only devotion was to playing sports.

* * *

My brothers and I attended Oak Valley and Laraway public schools in Joliet through the eighth grade, where we were all active in sports, especially baseball and basketball. I was a good student and I loved school, especially math. Having seen what caused my brothers to get in trouble at home and at school, I avoided those behaviors at all costs. I followed all the rules to a T. I was obedient to my parents and my teachers. I never wanted to mess up. I had to be perfect.

Sports and school allowed me to make some good friends, but I did not let anyone get too close to me. I did not like who I was on the inside, so I decided I was going to be perfect on the outside. I convinced myself that only then would everyone like me. I wanted to be the perfect student and the perfect athlete. In both areas I started to get attention, and this only fueled my desire for greater perfection. I thought that if I let anyone know the real me, they would surely run away and not want to be my friend. I certainly

did not know who I was at this point in my life. My identity and my worth came from being a good student and a good baseball player.

Dad worked long hours so that Mom could stay at home and raise us. With all the struggle my parents went through raising the three of us, they never let it stop them from making us feel important. Mom was especially good at this. If you ever needed to talk to her, she made you feel like you were the only person that existed. I never felt like I had to compete for her attention because the instant she spoke to me or looked at me, I knew that I was important, valued, and, most of all, loved. She loved the three of us fiercely, and her example taught me how to love.

I was with Mom the day that I realized what my dream and destiny would be. I was about seven when she took my brothers and me to a Cubs game at Wrigley Field. Dad had to work. Because they grew up in southern Illinois, my parents were both diehard fans of the St. Louis Cardinals. They despised the Cubs—also known as the “loveable losers.” We regularly watched them on Chicago’s WGN TV station, and we rooted for whoever was playing against them. I cannot remember who the Cubs were playing that first time we went, but I still remember how enthralled I was by the sights, the sounds, the smells, and the game.

The freshly cut grass, the crack of the bat, the stacked hot dogs, the cheers of the crowd, the bright sunshine, and the pure athleticism of the players on the field drew me. I thought to myself, “This is what I want to do when I grow up.” I wanted to be a part of this atmosphere forever. If I could play baseball and make a living doing it, that would be perfect. That day, like millions of young boys in America, I decided I was going to be a Major League Baseball player. I said to myself, “I’m going to be on this field one day.”

So I dedicated myself to becoming the best player I could be. Baseball became my passion. I kept score at home while watching the Cubs games. I played whenever I could. I ate, slept, breathed, and lived baseball.

It was decided: I was destined for the majors.