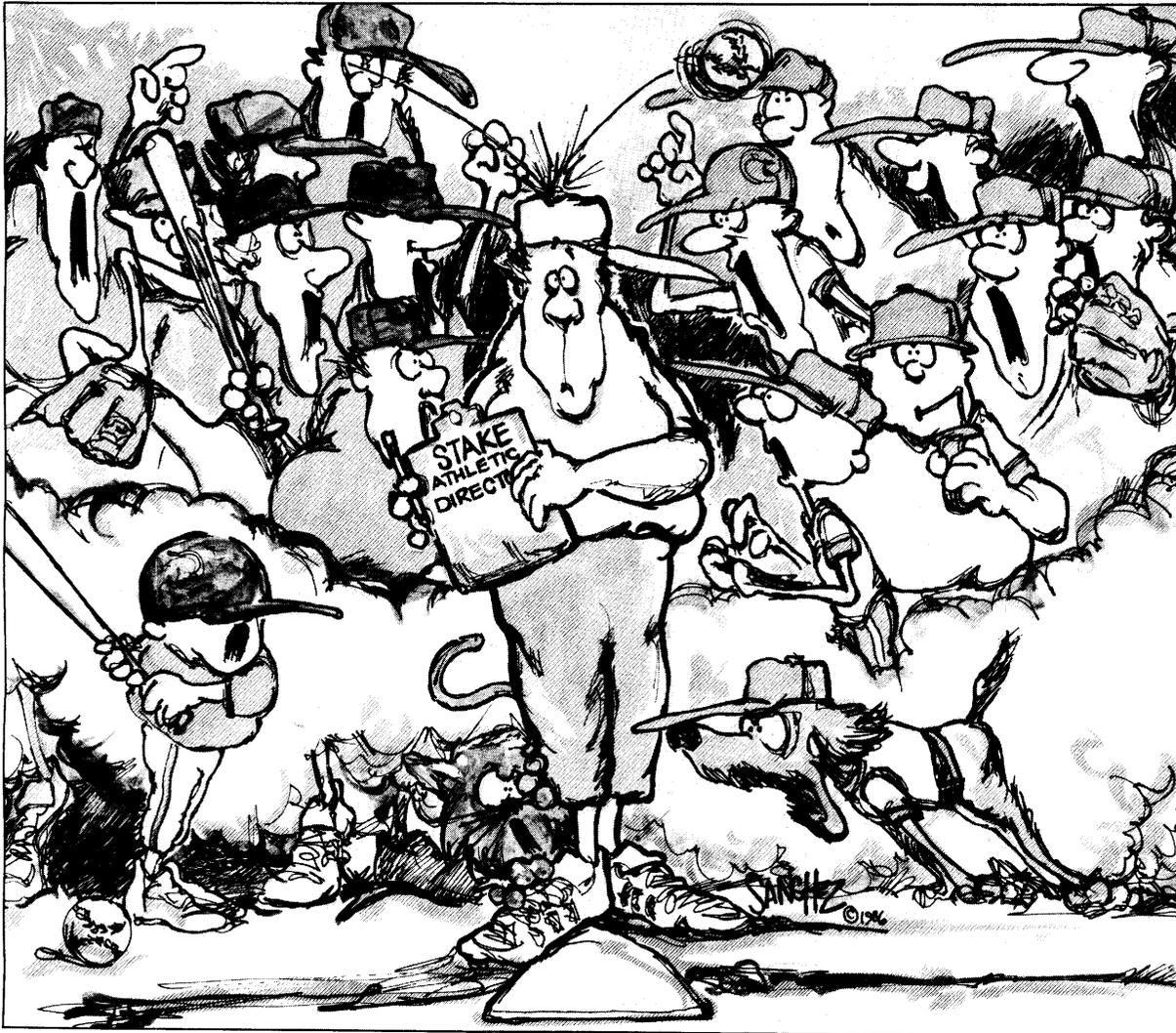


The Worst Job in the Church

Coping with the Thrill of Victory and the Agony of Defeat.



ILLUSTRATED BY GORDON SANCHEZ

By D. James Croft

When the editors at SUNSTONE saw the title of my article, they began to gripe and carp, saying it sounded too much like I was griping and carping about the Church. I told them that everybody expected SUNSTONE to gripe and carp about the Church, and that if their readers expected something sweet-smelling and prissy they would read *This People*. They admitted that *This People* was sweet but denied that this had anything to do with its smell. That's when I whipped out a

copy and showed them the ad for scratch-and-sniff Article of Faith cards, but they said I was changing the subject.

The upshot was that if I was going to gripe and carp, I had to be very scientific and analytical so that only the snooty intellectuals would know I was griping and carping. That way those who enjoy griping and carping would be secretly tickled, and those who don't would never know anyhow.

So I went back to the drawing board and became very scientific. A methodical approach to the "worst job in the Church," I decided, required some very specific (if highly arbitrary) criteria for measuring the desirability of Church jobs. Here's what I came up with: (1) Do the job's required tasks bring out the best in people? (2) Does the job demand a low level of effort? (3) Does it have a high level of recognition, glory, and appreciation from the people served? Of course, some readers may wish to argue with these criteria, but if they do, I say let them write their own article. Better yet, let them publish a nasty letter to the editor in the Readers Forum department. (The editors inform me that's where griping and carping is supposed to go anyway.)

At this point, I suddenly realized that these criteria could also be used in evaluating the best job in the Church. For example, think of the job of bishop. This calling certainly ranks high on criterion number one, or bringing out the best in people. Too, although there are times when the bishop sees many people at their worst, typically a bishop receives a great deal of appreciation, glory, and recognition from the people in his congregation (criterion number three). But this job fails to satisfy criterion number two: The amount of work most bishops put into their job is far too high to consider this important calling as one of the best in the Church. The ratio of glory to work is simply not high enough to get my vote for best job.

Several people have suggested that being a youth leader or teacher is the best job in the Church. But I have to disagree. True, these positions give you the opportunity to bring out the best in people. But these jobs also involve a substantial amount of work, if they are done right. And they are a mixed bag in the recognition, glory, and appreciation department. After all, people in these positions sometimes have to wait five to ten years until the students and youth they have worked so hard to serve move from the ward, go away to school, or leave on missions before they receive any kind of thoughtful recognition.

Based on my criteria, I believe the best job in the Church is that of Gospel Doctrine teacher. This person has the opportunity to influence people's lives for the better through good teaching. Moreover, if the class is awake and alert, the teacher merely has to prepare three controversial questions per week and then call on people who wish to answer them. Of course, the teacher does have to have one sentence at the end of the class to summarize what has been said and attempt to bring organization out of the chaos created by the various answers. Also, the Gospel Doctrine teacher gets a lot of recognition and appreciation from the members of the class. That's because this class typically involves a very significant number of the adult members of the ward: With that many people attending the class,

there's bound to be at least *one* who will come up and tell you your lesson was good, no matter how terrible it was.

Be that as it may, I created these criteria for the darker purpose of identifying the worst job in the Church. I know many people would say that scoutmaster must be one of the leading candidates. However, I think others would agree with me that this is really not so much a job as a sentence. Besides, it does have the long-term payoffs similar to those of youth leadership positions: When young men go off on missions or to school or the military service, the things they say in testimony meeting about their scouting experience and their former scoutmasters must make all of those scouting efforts seem worthwhile.

Another likely candidate for the worst job in the Church is ward financial clerk. There is certainly no glory in this job. In fact, there is no acknowledgment that it even exists, except when the bishop has to sustain some detail-oriented workaholic to that position in sacrament meeting. (How many of you reading this article can name your current ward financial clerk? See?) This poor soul labors long and hard and has very little impact on whether people behave at their best or worst. And the amount of work required of this person at tithing settlement nearly equals that of the bishop. But who ever offers the ward financial clerk the cookies, nice cards, and hugs the bishop receives? The only thing keeping this job from being the worst in the Church is that the financial clerk is the only one in the ward besides the bishop who knows how much everyone earns.

So what is the Church's worst job? In my opinion, any job with the word *stake* in its title must be a serious contender. That's because people with stake jobs often have to work very hard at what they do (with the obvious exception of high councilors), receive little recognition or glory, and don't really get to work with the people in the Church. Stake leaders merely work with other stake leaders and their ward counterparts. As a result, they spend their time dealing with ecclesiastical overachievers who are difficult to influence for better or for worse (or influence at all for that matter).

Among the stake positions which could be considered, I must nominate the calling of stake athletic director as the worst job in the Church. The work load alone is enough to drive a lesser man to a sex-change operation. For example, one of its major duties is to set up the programs that sponsor the athletic contests between stakes, wards, and individuals. In addition, this pre-season work includes obtaining facilities, scheduling team play, developing rules that govern the games and events, and finding officials to enforce those rules.

Another perplexing responsibility of the stake athletic director is establishing eligibility: Who

gets to play for each team? No matter how tightly the rules are written to establish eligibility, new interpretations will be required to settle such important religious issues as whether an individual is eligible to play on a ward team if he moved into his aunt's house three games into the season. Some of these issues and their resolutions are enough to cross a rabbi's eyes.

After all the pre-season work is done, the stake athletic director also gets to administer the play during the season and adjudicate any disputes which arise. By some mysterious phenomenon understood only by religious mystics in the Indiana-Muncie mission, it turns out that everyone present at a given game is an expert on the rules *except* the amateur officials assigned to help the stake athletic director. Even the opinion of the stake athletic director is considered worthless. This is particularly curious, given that the stake athletic director wrote the rules himself at the first of the season. Most challenging of all is the fact that the athletic director must adjudicate these disputes when everyone is excitable and given to contention.

No one should underestimate the amount of work involved in resolving these disagreements. At such moments, it becomes apparent that when Solomon wrote, "a soft answer turneth away wrath," he had certainly never been on a softball field or basketball court (Prov. 15:1). I have been involved in situations where questionable calls by officials or referees have been debated for weeks after the season was over by people I had once thought were rational. Rivalries between Church units have become so intense in some quarters that parents attend games to prevent violence or mini-rioting after the events. Some Latter-day Saint referees and officials who are certified by their local athletic associations will not officiate in Church events: They say they would simply rather work the industrial leagues where they do not have to take so much abuse.

Through it all, the stake athletic director must keep in mind that he has to be fair to everyone involved and live by the letter of the rules which he (or perhaps the American Softball Association) has determined. After all, enforcement of the rules may determine who wins, and winning, of course, is the most important thing in an athletic contest. At least that's how it seems to many of the participants. In coaching, I have seen adult team members quit because, as they told me, "You're playing me less than I should be playing; I'm more talented than others you're giving equal playing time to." My response is: "Fine. If you want to win, go play for a county recreation league."

Perhaps the job of a stake athletic director and those officials he has to work with would be easier if there were age and ability restrictions on players that participate in these events. This would eliminate a common problem in today's

Church athletic program known as *the aging jock syndrome*. Such yesteryear athletes, finding they can no longer keep up with the younger players, sometimes resort to subtle competitive strategies to compensate for the age and slowness which are creeping up on them—things like tripping opponents or punching them out to slow them down a bit.

It may seem difficult to believe that this sort of behavior would actually take place among Christians (especially Mormon-type Christians). Perhaps in our effort to become as little children, we overshoot our devolutionary goal and become as little animals. Whatever the theological explanation, the basketball court or the baseball diamond seems to bring out the beast in too many of us. Just walking onto the court or onto a field can sometimes unleash irresistible competitive juices in the most gentle of brothers and sisters.

For example, I had an opportunity for a period of time to play basketball on a regular basis with a person who is now a General Authority. His name is well known in the Church as one of the most kind and loving people in the whole world. His speeches and books exude love toward his fellow men. But even he experiences this transformation on a basketball court.

Naturally, you will never catch me succumbing to such lunacy. Of course there was a very understandable incident in a basketball game I played several years ago. Now that I think about it, I was playing quite well. In fact I had a very good first half, which for some reason surprised everyone who knew my skill at basketball. When it came to the second half, the other team, seeing my obvious talent, put a very tenacious guard on me. He was very good at keeping me from getting the ball. But finally late in the third **quarter I got the pass, dodged the guy who was guarding me and went in for the lay-up.** Assessing the situation, he committed an intentional foul by grabbing me around the waist and holding me back. He figured, quite rationally I suppose, that a foul was better than a sure lay-up. Almost instinctively, I let my elbow fly, knocking the guard on the chin. Poor sport that he was, he instantly fell asleep and dropped to the floor. The official, however, failing to appreciate normal human reflexes, ejected me from the game. It was a mortifying experience to be treated so unjustly. But I have gotten over it. In fact, when I recently mentioned this to a friend of mine, he suggested that it was probably my fixation on this event that prompted me to write this essay. I chuckled and explained how wrong he was, and, like a gentleman, he apologized, although he paused first to pick up several of his teeth.

But how does the job of stake athletic director measure up according to my three criteria of Church job desirability? First, do the efforts of the stake athletic director bring out the best in the people he serves? In theory, this job is supposed to do just that. According to the

Church's *Guidelines and Rules of Play for Competitive Athletics*, the purpose of the Church athletic program is to promote the well-being of Church members by providing various wholesome competitive athletic activities to "build character and integrity, develop athletic skills, encourage fitness, promote good sportsmanship, promote friendship, [and] proselyte and activate non-members and inactive members." During my years of personal experience in Church athletic activities, I have seen some cases in which these objectives have actually been met. However, my conversations with experienced people lead me to believe that when it comes to the Church athletic programs, theory and practice are almost total strangers. Indeed, all too often the efforts of the stake athletic director bring out not the best but the worst in people. The athletic director spends a significant amount of time creating and governing situations that are highly emotional and prone to conflict. Moreover, the program itself is specifically designed to produce winners and losers. Perhaps an institution which prides itself on promoting the self-worth of individuals and building positive self-images should seriously reconsider putting so much time and effort into programs which regularly produce losers and low self-esteem.

I have already ~~griped about~~ analyzed at length the second criterion of effort level. Clearly, this calling requires incredible amounts of time to organize and adjudicate, a high level of administrative skills, an extra telephone line at home and a truly exceptional level of tolerance for watching mediocre athletic performance.

I know what you are thinking: Why not just get some assistants and delegate some, most, or all of the work? Forget it. Almost invariably, the people who are called to be assistants or ward athletic directors fit into the category of "miracle workers"—it's a miracle if they ever work. This is because many ecclesiastical leaders see callings to the athletic program as an ideal way to activate the truly flakey members of the ward. Unfortunately, assigning some inactive, has-been jock or sports trivia nut to the ward or stake athletic program can have a rather detrimental effect. Some of these people simply have too much emotional capital invested in the game, spend too little time thinking about the purposes of the program, and emphasize winning over sportsmanship. Furthermore, when it comes to administrative skills, they are definitely bench-warmers. Suffice it to say that the team of workers often given to the stake athletic director are not destined to be enshrined in Mormonism's administrative or spiritual Hall of Fame.

Spirituality, in fact, is a decidedly *optional* skill in this Church job. The only spiritual part of any athletic competitions in the Church is the mandatory opening prayer just before the competition. During a recent softball game, I called the two teams together, and the home team called upon

one of its members to pray. In the prayer, the player said, "Dear Lord, please bless us that we'll remember the purposes of the athletic competition, that we'll engage in fair play, that we'll be good sports, that we'll develop friendship, and we'll remember that it doesn't matter who wins or loses." On walking back to the dugout, one of his teammates said to him, "Boy, you sure ruined this game!"

Just like any other job, that of the stake athletic director would be tolerable if there were enough glory, recognition and admiration to compensate for the work performed (criterion three). But when was the last time you heard anyone in fast meeting express appreciation for the stake athletic director? I submit that this must be a rather rare event, if it has ever occurred at all. Instead, the stake athletic director receives a great amount of abuse for the decisions he has to make regarding rules, eligibility, and scheduling.

There are, of course, those bright shining moments when players, coaches, and fans credit you with the wisdom of a Solomon for deciding an issue in their favor. However, that praise, like fame, is fleeting. Indeed, one quickly realizes how fragile this admiration is the moment he makes a clearly uninspired decision against the interests of the team.

Why, you may ask, do I continue to be involved in the stake athletic program if I have such a negative attitude and believe it to be the worst job in the Church? The answer is that after three years of intense involvement in the stake athletic program, I am at the end of my rope. I have asked for release. I have even gone so far as to request a new job and specified the position I would like to have. I have requested that I be compensated for this arduous experience by calling me to the best job in the Church.

No, I have not requested the position of Gospel Doctrine teacher. In fact, the job I have requested is one that doesn't even exist in the Church as yet. I would like to be the *inactive priesthood member monitor*. This is an undercover assignment given to an active member like myself who has the responsibility of working with inactive brethren by cleverly infiltrating their numbers for several years. The cover for this assignment will be so deep that not even the bishop and priesthood leaders of the ward will know who has the job. This is necessary so the inactive priesthood member monitor can meet with the stake president on an annual basis and report not only on the stake's inactive priesthood members but on the ward reactivation efforts as well.

But there is one serious risk associated with this job: In the efforts to reactivate me, is it possible that my bishop and local priesthood leaders may end up calling me to work in the stake athletic program?

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