

A Conversation with Pat Summerall

by **Phil Kratovil**

How did you first get involved in sports?

I grew up in a very poor family environment. My folks were separated so I lived with my grandmother, then later with my aunt and uncle. I began devoting my life to sports, always playing some kind of ball. That was what I loved.

I went to college on a basketball scholarship, but also played football and tennis. When you play three sports, it's about all you can do, so that was my religion. Sports became my way of escaping from my family and the pain I experienced growing up. I was always traveling to and playing in a sporting event and afterwards we usually celebrated with a beer drinking session or something similar. When I made it to pro football, we always played on Sunday and when I started broadcasting it was on Sunday, so I didn't have a chance to get involved with church or any religious activity for that matter.

What things were most important to you during this time?

When I became a professional, achieving success became the most important thing in my life. I wanted to climb the ladder of success to be the best I could at whatever I was attempting, whether playing or broadcasting. Money was important to me too, but I knew that money would come with success. So achieving success was my vision.

By this time I was married with three children and playing with the New York Giants. I played in the NFL for ten years, then went right to work for CBS as a broadcaster. In the broadcasting business, there was plenty of liquor available and I became addicted to the consumption of alcohol, especially whiskey, which was my favorite.

This was having a negative impact on my family but I didn't realize it. I was blind to it. I couldn't fathom why they didn't understand why I was doing what I was doing. My drinking habit got worse and worse. People told me to slow down, that I was killing myself and that I was neglecting my work. I dismissed it, thinking that I was just as good as I had ever been. I had become a success professionally and financially but I was a mess in terms of what I was accomplishing at home and how I was living my personal life.

What made you change course?

Finally, after years of this, some friends of mine held what I would call an intervention. They had all written letters expressing how much I meant to them, how much they loved me and how much they hated to see what I was doing to myself. They encouraged me to go to the Betty Ford Clinic, which, after much coaxing, meddling and begging by my friends and family, I agreed to do.

What impact did that experience have on you?

After I arrived and got sober, I began to see what I had done to myself. I stayed at the clinic for 33 days. I met people there who were like me, struggling to find out what life was about: what were the good things in life and what were the right things about life. And I realized that this was not something that I could handle alone. Until then, as an athlete, as a successful person in business and in athletics, I thought I could manage everything myself. I didn't think I needed any help. But I began to understand that I couldn't continue alone. I had to have some help and I had to make a decision where that help was going to come from. So I began to read the Bible in order to investigate if there was a source of strength that was available there from God.

I came out of there with a newborn faith and something I hadn't had before: hope. Hope for a better life. Hope for a happier life. Hope for a correct life... I became more and more involved and inquisitive about a relationship with God... I didn't have nearly all the answers by the time I got out of the clinic, but I felt I had a new source of strength to draw on.

I got remarried. My family had fallen apart as a result of all this. The day I quit drinking, my present wife Cherry also quit drinking. So we have gone through a recovery period together. We moved to Texas... I had given up my life, my clinging to the macho beliefs that I had and the things that had led me, I thought, to success... I felt free and new and different. I don't have the words to use to describe it. Since then it has been a wonderfully happy life.

How did all this affect your family?

During this period my relationship with my children was very strained. All of them held me responsible for the breakup of the family. But since then, they have seen what has happened to me. They have seen how I've changed and how happy I am now and how involved I am with helping people in overcoming alcoholism. I've been able to sit down with all three of them and explain how much this means to my life. As a result of that, some of the damage, maybe not all of it, has been repaired. I don't know that I will overcome all of it, but I am very close to my kids now. They are very close to my wife and it is a great relationship.

What are your plans now?

I am retiring from full-time broadcasting and stepping out of the booth with John Madden. He and I had 21 wonderful years together but I felt it was time for a break. I am going to do some football and other sports that I haven't done in a long time. I still intend to broadcast because I love it.

If I had it to do over again I would approach life in a different manner. I wouldn't be so obsessed with success in my career. I realize now that I was filling my life with things that couldn't bring ultimate fulfillment and purpose. I would make time in my life for God... And I would make my family a priority. I would make sure both those things happen.

Pat Summerall is the signature voice of sports broadcasting in America. As a professional football player, Pat was best known as the kicker for the legendary New York Giants championship teams of the late '50s and '60s. After his retirement from the gridiron, he became the mainstay of the CBS Sports broadcasting team for 32 years. In 1994, Pat and broadcast partner, John Madden, joined the Fox network. For 21 years, they were the strongest sports casting team in the history of the game.

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