

THE TWO RIVER TIMES

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THE WEEK OF OCTOBER 19 - 26, 2017

# HARRY FLAHERTY

## *Preaching The Four C's Playbook*

AT FIRST GLANCE inside his second-floor Red Bank office, it's apparent the game of football has impacted Harry Flaherty's life.

Take, for example, the full-size portrait of former Dallas Cowboys head coach Tom Landry, who is grasping a playbook during a 1984 game. It greets Flaherty each morning beside his desk. Or the photo of legendary Green Bay Packers head coach Vince Lombardi on the wall down the hallway. Even his own memorabilia – a visibly beaten, white and purple helmet from his All-American playing days for the Crusaders at the College of Holy Cross in Worcester, Massachusetts – is prominently displayed atop a file cabinet along with other memories of his career, gathered together by his wife, Janine.

Since 1995, Flaherty has served as New Jersey's director of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA), an international, Judeo-Christian values ministry and nonprofit organization aiming to help athletes and coaches find, craft, and continue a relationship with God.

For Flaherty, who played in the National Football League and the now-defunct United States Football League as a middle linebacker, football led him to truly find his place in the world. For him, that place was ultimately in the hands of God.

"At some point, my love for sports became more important than my love for God," said Flaherty, 55, of Oceanport. "Even though I never doubted God existed, never doubted my parents loved me, at some point in my life, whether it was high school or college, I started getting 'atta boys' to the point where my identity was as an athlete."

After graduating from Red Bank Catholic in 1980 as a three-sport athlete, Flaherty went on to play football and baseball on scholarship at Holy Cross. He graduated in 1984 and was then signed by the Philadelphia Eagles as a rookie free agent. Flaherty was later released by the Eagles, leaving him to question the foundation of his life to that point – athletics.

"I felt like it was the worst day of my life," Flaherty recalled. "It was the first time in my life anybody told me as an athlete I wasn't good enough."

But the hardship would turn out to be a life-altering event, one from which he would never look back.

Flaherty joined the USFL's Tampa Bay Bandits in 1985. In a Tampa Bay hotel lobby, he encountered Doc Eshleman, an NFL chapel leader. Flaherty said Eshleman "really shared the Gospel with me in a way that I didn't understand."

Until that point, Flaherty said, "I understood religion in going to church and being a good guy, but I didn't really understand what Jesus did on the cross for me." His conversation with Eshleman, and his own reflections led to enlightenment. "It's about a personal relationship with him (Jesus)."

After a stint with the USFL's Baltimore Stars, followed by time back in the NFL with the Dallas Cowboys, Flaherty's playing career ended in 1987 and he began to dedicate himself to a life serving God through athletics.

From 1988 through 1995, Flaherty toured the country with Sports World Ministries, presenting motivational speeches in 37 states at more than 1,700 high schools to nearly 18,000 students.

Also in 1988, Flaherty married Janine Garrett, sister of current Dallas Cowboys head coach Jason Garrett. And from 1988 to 1994 the Flahertys had five children: Harry Jr., 28; Zach, 27; Jake, 25; Abigail, 24; and Jesse, 22.

During his time at Sports World Ministries, Flaherty spoke alongside Gary Cuozzo, D.D.S., an orthodontist with offices in Lincroft and Sea Girt. But Cuozzo – a 10-year NFL veteran who backed up Hall of Fame quarterback Johnny Unitas – was a key figure in establishing northeast FCA chapters. In 1995, Cuozzo convinced Flaherty not only to join New Jersey's FCA, but become the man in charge.

For the past 22 years, Flaherty has been the face of FCANJ. With a 12- to 14-person staff, the state FCA operates in 156 high schools throughout all 21 counties. Colts Neck, Henry Hudson Regional, Holmdel, Middletown North and South, Red Bank Catholic, Red Bank Regional, Rumson-Fair Haven Regional, St.

John Vianney and Shore Regional each have FCA "huddles," which are before and after school bible study and devotion sessions.

Through a Four C's ministry plan – coaches, camps, campus and community – Flaherty said the FCA is able to reinforce the principles of "identity, character, significance and value," with student athletes.

"Nobody really has self-worth unless they realize they're not here by accident," Flaherty added.

Flaherty personally leads the weekly FCA huddle for Red Bank Catholic on Friday mornings. He also visits Shore Regional every other Tuesday to conduct huddles for the Blue Devils' athletes.

On top of his daily tasks of calling coaches and donors and meeting with his statewide staff, Flaherty will soon take his platform international. In August 2018, he will be flying to Beijing, China to work on three-dimensional coaching with Chinese coaches. He said it's simply a continuation of the work being done by countless others around the country.

"In your work, you're a coach. As a teacher, you're a coach," he said. "You're trying to get people from where they are to where they need to be."

Through Flaherty's 40-plus years of involvement with student athletes, dating back to his own time as a Casey and Crusader, there seems to be no sunset on the horizon for his career.

"I feel like I'm called to do this," he said, adding retirement is likely to never show up on the weekly game plan.

Much of that sentiment derives from challenges facing student athletes today, which Flaherty believes remains the same as in years past. Whether it's concerns about alcohol and drug abuse or the everyday battle of working to find oneself during those tumultuous teenage years, he will be there for New Jersey's youth. He says he'll continue to serve as the conduit for building those relationships with God.

"When we share the love of God, it can change our heart," said Flaherty. "And a changed heart is a changed life."

By JAY COOK

