

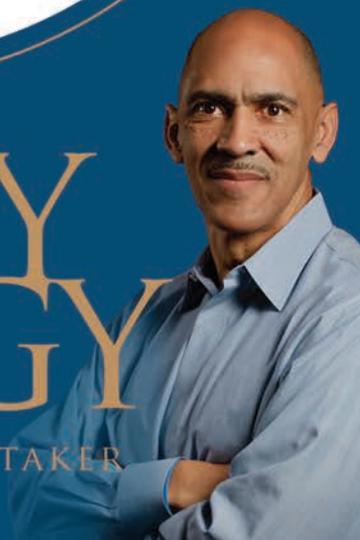
#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

THE
SOUL
OF A
TEAM

A MODERN-DAY
FABLE FOR WINNING
TEAMWORK

TONY
DUNGY

WITH NATHAN WHITAKER



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TONY DUNGY

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The Soul of a Team: A Modern-Day Fable for Winning Teamwork

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

I HAVE BEEN WORKING in or around the National Football League for more than forty years—first as a player for the Pittsburgh Steelers and San Francisco 49ers, then as a coach for the Pittsburgh Steelers, Kansas City Chiefs, Minnesota Vikings, Tampa Bay Buccaneers, and Indianapolis Colts, and now as a broadcast analyst for NBC. In that time, I have seen some pretty crazy stuff: tantrums, arrests, locker room fights, leaks to reporters about personnel issues, you name it. I've also seen a lot of great things: selfless acts of courage and compassion, moments of kindness and humility, and people living with faith and integrity and making a genuine difference in the world.

Though some individuals behave horribly and others live honorably, they all have something in common: They affect the people around them. The same is true of us. Our actions and attitudes really do impact those we live and work with. No wonder the number one topic I'm asked to speak about is teamwork.

I've spent decades considering what it takes for a team to rise to the top. I've learned that talent alone isn't enough; some teams that appear most promising on paper end up fizzling. Through experience—both successes and failures—I have

learned what generally separates high-achieving teams from those that fail to produce.

After I was invited to write a book on this topic, one of the first decisions I needed to make was how to best present this information to you. Given that I've spent two-thirds of my life on or around football teams, I decided the most natural approach would be to unpack these principles through a story set in the environment I'm most familiar with. In addition, I hope reading about teamwork in this context will be interesting and fun for you. And while the context may be set in professional football, these principles apply to *all* teams, whether within a family unit, a company or church, or a high school drama club.

All characters and events associated with the Orlando Vipers, the fictitious expansion team around which the story centers, are imaginary. To help explain principles, I sometimes draw upon actual people and incidents I have observed—both on my own teams and others'—over the past four decades.

Tony Dungy



PART I

The Problem

THE CALL

ON A PICTURE-PERFECT FEBRUARY DAY IN TAMPA, I was out in the yard hitting grounders and pop flies to my son Justin. I had just gotten back from the Super Bowl in Miami, where Chicago, in an ending for the ages, had beaten Baltimore on a game-ending pick-six.

“Stay in front of it, Justin,” I called out as he raced forward to stop a hard grounder. “Try not to play it off to the side if you can help it.”

Upon running it down, he snatched the ball up in his glove, stood, and hurled it back. As the ball smacked into my bare palm, I could literally feel his frustration. “Hey, easy there,” I said. “Remember, I’m not wearing a glove.”

“Sorry,” he mumbled, turning away.

I took a second to shake off the sting. Poor kid. A natural lefty, he had wanted to play first base, but after seeing his speed, the coach decided to put him in center field. To Justin’s credit, he was giving it his all and doing very well. Practically every game, he saved a couple of runs by chasing a ball down or making a great catch.

But Justin didn't see it that way. In fact, on our drive home from practice just a few days before, he had slumped down in the backseat and told me he hated his coach.

"Why?" I asked. "Your coach is a great guy."

"Because," he grumbled, "he won't let me play first base. I hate the outfield."

On the one hand, I got it. Pretty much every Little League kid wants to play in the infield or pitch. I know I did when I was his age. Still, I wanted to hear his reasoning.

"Why do you want to play first base?"

"Because that's where all the action is," he said matter-of-factly. "In center field, I only get like two balls a game, tops. If I was playing first base, I'd get fifteen or twenty."

"You know why the coach has you out there, don't you?" I asked.

"Yeah . . . he hates me," he shot back.

"He doesn't hate you, Justin," I said, catching his eye in the rearview mirror. "Yes, 90 percent of the balls are hit in the infield, but if someone does hit one into the outfield, your team's going to give up a lot of runs if it's not caught. You're the fastest one on that team. You can cover a lot of ground out there—maybe more than anyone else. That's why he's got you in center. You're playing a very important position. He put you there because it's what's best for the team."

I could almost see the gears spinning in his ten-year-old mind as he turned his attention to the scenery whizzing by. *He'll get it—eventually*, I consoled myself.

But two days later, back in our yard, he was still upset.

"Okay, Justin," I said, tossing the ball a little higher. "Let's see some of that speed!" The bat sent the ball up into the air about fifteen yards to Justin's left. Without hesitating, he took

off like a shot, reached across his body, and made a spectacular backhand grab.

“See? That’s what I’m talking about!”

“Tony!” my wife, Lauren, called from the patio. “Terry Hodges is on the phone.”

“Back in a minute, buddy,” I said to Justin. Even though he was a good thirty feet away, I could see him roll his eyes. He knew by now that whenever a friend from the NFL called, it was rarely just a minute.



I hadn’t spoken with Terry in weeks—not since his Orlando Vipers had missed the playoffs with a loss to Dallas in the final game of the regular season.

“I’ll take it in my study,” I said to Lauren as I passed her in the kitchen.

She smiled, winked at me, and nodded her head toward Justin in the backyard. “How’s he doing today?”

“He’s still a little upset, but he’ll come around.”

Lauren sighed. “I hope so.”

“Hey, Terry,” I said after picking up the phone in my office. “It’s good to hear from you. How’s everything in Orlando?”

“Hi, Tony. About as can be expected, I guess.” He sounded tired, defeated. But then so did the other team presidents, except for one, now that the season was over and they hadn’t won the Super Bowl.

“I have to tell you, Terry . . . I really thought you guys were going to make it into the playoffs this year.” And I meant that. After Terry had left his position as a federal judge to take over the reins of the Vipers, I could sense they were on the cusp of something great. But like a lot of teams, too many

mistakes, injuries, bad luck, and bad plays eventually caught up with them.

“Yeah, so did I,” he said, sighing. “That’s what I wanted to talk to you about.”

“Sure,” I said, settling in at my desk. “What’s up?”

Terry paused for a second, then spoke, his words uncharacteristically tumbling over themselves. “I don’t know what to do here, Tony. We just can’t seem to turn the corner. I’ve been here three seasons now, and we’ve gone 8–8, 7–9, and now 8–8 again. The owner’s frustrated, the coaches are frustrated, the players are frustrated, the fans are frustrated . . .”

“And *you’re* frustrated,” I said, finishing the sentence for him.

“Yes,” he replied, the tone of defeat clear in his voice.

Football. It’s all fun and games when you’re winning, I mused, leaning back in my chair. *But when you’re not . . .*

Terry was just getting started. “Frankly, Tony, I’ve about given up on this group. In fact, I’m thinking about just blowing the whole thing up, firing everyone, and starting over from scratch.”

Now *that* caught my attention. I’d known Terry for almost ten years, and he’d always been a very measured, deliberate, and thoughtful guy—definitely not the type to go off half-cocked and start firing people on a dime.

I sat back up. “Seriously? You’d fire Gym? And Joe? That’s a little rash, isn’t it? Gym McKenzie is a fantastic person, Terry. And from what I can tell, an excellent general manager. He’s put together very talented teams, both for you in Orlando and in Detroit a few years ago.

“As for Joe Webster,” I continued, “I’ve only spent a little time with him since he became head coach, but he seems like a solid person. It’s only been a couple of seasons, Terry. You’ve got to give the guy a chance.”

“I hear you, Tony,” Terry replied, “but something’s got to give. The team’s going nowhere. We’ve spent a ton on players and brought in the best coaching staff we could find, but it doesn’t feel like we’re making any progress. We should be so much better than we are.

“The really aggravating thing,” he said, “is that we beat three of the teams that made it to the playoffs this year by ten points or more, including New England—on the road! We were even the last team to beat Chicago before they went on their Super Bowl run.”

“Yeah, that was a great game . . .” I was about to continue when Terry cut me off.

“But then we turned right around and lost back-to-back games to teams scraping the bottoms of their divisions. We’ve got some of the best talent in this league, and yet we can’t seem to maintain any sense of consistency.”

I tried to defuse the situation a little. “Listen, Terry. Firing everyone is rarely the right move. Bear in mind that as bad as things seem, there are easily ten or twelve other teams that would love to have your problems. I think you’re really close.”

“I know,” Terry conceded. “But even with a top-five offense and a top-twenty defense, we’re still trapped in the middle. Fifteenth—in a league where only the top twelve make the playoffs.”

I had to admit he was making some excellent points. The Vipers had a lot of talented players and, from what I could tell, a top-notch coaching staff. And sure, sometimes challenging times call for drastic measures. But the concept of mass firings has never sat well with me. For one thing, you run the risk of losing some good people along with the bad. It also creates an environment of fear and mistrust among those left behind, which is rarely productive. More important, though,

firing people in an organization affects not only *them* but their families as well. It's just not the kind of decision good leaders take lightly—or make in haste out of desperation.

“Listen, Terry, before you fire anyone . . .”

“That’s why I’m calling, Tony,” he interrupted. “I don’t *want* to fire anyone. At least not unless I absolutely have to. In fact,” he paused for a second, “I’m thinking of *hiring* someone.”

“Who?” I asked.

“You.”

I tried—and failed—to stifle a laugh. “Terry, I’m officially retired. You know that. My coaching days are over. Besides, Lauren would have my head if—”

“No, no, no. I’m not talking about coaching, Tony. I’m talking about consulting. Just come out to the facility a couple of days a week. You are only about an hour away, so whatever your schedule allows. Sit in on team meetings, staff meetings, practices. I’ll even clear out an office for you so players, coaches, and other staff can drop in and chat with you.”

“About what?” I asked.

“Whatever they’d like,” he said. “Look, Tony, I need to get a fresh perspective on this. Maybe you can tell us what’s wrong. Do I need to fire someone? Everyone? Is the problem the players, the coaching staff, or both? Or maybe we have all the right pieces and they’re just not fitting together. I really could use a fresh set of eyes here. What do you say?”

“I don’t know. It’s tough to get involved as an outsider and not make a mess of things,” I cautioned.

“Things are already a mess,” Terry said. “That’s why I’m calling. I don’t expect you to have all the answers, but you *have* been around this league for a long time, and you’ve worked with some of the best in the business. If anyone can tell me what we’re doing wrong and help steer us in the right direction, it’s you.”

“Wait a minute, Terry,” I interrupted him. “Don’t give me too much credit. Anything I’ve done right over the course of my career is just a reflection of things I’ve learned from people like Chuck Noll, Denny Green, and Bill Walsh. Those guys had a *huge* influence on me.”

“I know, Tony. There’s no question you’ve learned from the best. And our guys could really benefit from that. What good is all your knowledge if you don’t pass it on?”

Now he had me. I owed practically everything I’d accomplished to those guys, as well as to others who had mentored me. It did seem like a shame not to pass it on.

As I leaned back in my chair, I caught a glimpse of Justin out in the yard tossing the ball to himself. A smile crept across my face. Even the advice I’d given him the other day in the car was inspired by what Coach Noll had told me when I first joined the Steelers: “Every job on this team is important!”

“Well?” Terry nudged. “What do you say, Tony?”

I had to admit, the idea was intriguing. *It would only be a few hours a week*, I reasoned. I glanced over at a framed picture of me and Denny Green after a Colts-Cardinals game. *He’s right*, I thought. *Some advice is just too good to keep to yourself.*

“Well, Lauren and I will have to discuss it first, but if she’s on board . . . frankly, Terry, I would love to help.”



As expected, getting Lauren to agree to the idea wasn’t easy. She had been a coach’s wife long enough to know that a couple of hours a week could quickly turn into a couple of hours a day, possibly more. Terry even came out to the house to promise her in person that my involvement with the team would be temporary and mostly confined to the off-season. In other words, he wasn’t asking me to take on a full-time job—just spend a

couple of days at the stadium here and there to observe, listen, and offer some advice.

“Then why does he need an office?” she asked.

“Simply for privacy,” Terry assured her. “I want our players and coaches to feel as though they can confide in Tony—speak freely with him about their concerns—and that’s hard to do in a crowded locker room or hallway.

“Trust me,” he continued, “I know how important family time is to the two of you, and I have no intention of disrupting that. And I wouldn’t even be asking if I hadn’t already exhausted every other viable option.”

Lauren remained unpersuaded. Terry glanced at me in desperation, but I just smiled. Then Terry turned back to her and threw a final Hail Mary.

“Tell you what. What if we all agree that the minute this position becomes an inconvenience for you, Tony, or the kids, we call it a day?”

Lauren looked over at me. I raised my eyebrows and smiled. She knew how much I liked and admired Terry—we both did. She also knew how much it would mean to me to be able to help a friend in need.

The corners of her mouth turned up slightly, and then she looked back at Terry.

“Okay,” she managed, exhaling deeply. “We’ll *try* it.”