



## Undeserved Victory

*Bless the Lord who crowns you with tender mercies (Psalm 103, NKJV).*

**W**inning in sports is an obsession. Whether the Super-Bowl frenzy or March Madness or summer Little League, winning can easily become everything. But team unity and sportsmanship often provide lessons and tender mercies that winning does not afford. Consider the Lady Chaparrals of ChristWay Academy. Their story was told in *Sports Illustrated* (March 1999).

The setting is Duncanville, Texas, at a tiny high school—ChristWay Academy. The girls' basketball team, the Lady Chaparrals, were playing against Arlington Oakridge. The contest was hopelessly lopsided. Throughout the game, Coach Jennifer Marks thought, "*if only we could score.*" Or, "*if only we could get the ball to midcourt.*" No luck. The final score was 103-0. Marks' husband, Scott, who was training for pastoral ministry, tried to comfort her in her misery—long days and sleepless nights of self-doubt and second-guessing her coaching calls. "He did the best thing he could do, which was to just hold me and listen."

The next game they played was not quite as hopelessly lopsided, and in the game after that, the Lady Chaparrals actually scored 15 points—still losing by more than 60 points, however.

But, writes John Walters in *Sports Illustrated*, "a funny thing happened to the ChristWay girls: Nothing. Nobody quit. Nobody whined. Nobody, including Marks, blamed anyone else." Seven of the nine team members had never even shot baskets until the season began. Of course, Coach Marks wanted to win, "but most of them," she said, referring to her team, "are just learning how to play."

I can identify with the coach. I, too, was a small-school coach. In my case the game was volleyball. How well I remember the

struggles we had in going up against much larger schools, and how well I remember the painful—and sometimes embarrassing—losses. We savored the wins whenever and however they came, and we desperately tried to maintain an element of optimism.

So also with Coach Marks and the Lady Chaparrals. There was a ray of hope as they anticipated playing Gospel Lighthouse of Dallas. Would they be able to compete against this team with a record of 1-19? They knew Lighthouse would fight hard to come away with a 2-19 record.

But for the Lady Chaparrals the stakes seemed even higher. One win. They would celebrate if they could capture that one elusive win.

Lighthouse might have gone into the game with a cocky attitude but for the reality that there were only five girls available to suit up. They were worried and tense, fighting to add one more win to their record. In their desperation to maintain their lead, however, Lighthouse became aggressive—committing foul after foul. With seventeen seconds on the board, Lighthouse was ahead 43-40, but left with only one player on the floor. The referee had no choice. The game was over. Lighthouse had to forfeit.

"Officially the Lady Chaparrals had a 2-0 win—their first and, as it would turn out, only victory of the season," writes Marks. "It wasn't pretty, but who deserved to win more?"

I smile as I think of that victory. It hits home—one of those tender mercies so relished and yet so undeserved. But more important than the victory was the recognition of teamwork and the commitment to move forward and not give up. How does a coach survive with a team of what some might term "losers"? Through tender mercies. Referring to her husband, Coach Marks says it all: "He did the best thing he could do, which was to just hold me and listen." □

—Ruth A. Tucker

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