

Athletes in Action: They Serve Christ Through Sports

These are times of diversity, an era when doing your own thing has become the norm. In these times, in athletics, we think mostly of the swingers; the bad guys are now the good guys. But more and more we are hearing about the good guys. One such group is Athletes in Action, a group of dedicated Christians. A 12-member wrestling team, composed of athletes from across the nation, has settled in Lancaster and will compete throughout the East and South. Who are these athletes? How do they raise their own support? What motivates a man and his family to dedicate their lives to Christ and serve through athletics?

The coach of the team is Neil Turner, former wrestling coach at Stevens Trade School (1965-67) and Clarion State. The director of the team is Gregg Hicks, a graduate of North Carolina State. In this taped interview with Sunday News sports editor Bill Fisher, Hicks and Turner discuss their role and Athletes in Action.

How are you received by people? Don't you run into a lot of people who are somewhat embarrassed by athletes trying to sell Christianity?

Hicks — You always run into that one guy or so who gets ticked off that you are even a Christian whether you are an athlete or not, but I don't run into that often; and I speak in a lot of places — fraternities, sororities, places a lot of Christians never go. We do that purposely. I think a lot of it is in what and how you present yourself and what you are saying. We try to do it in a way that is pleasing and not offending.

How do you do that; what is pleasing and not offending?

Hicks — We don't stand on street corners and yell at people. It is the approach that says, 'Look, this has changed my life. I went to college, I had your hangups, I still have hangups, but Christ has really changed me, given meaning to my life.' It has not turned people off. The opposite has happened. People have literally swarmed me at meetings. We don't talk about a God way up there, we talk about life. This appeals to people that are looking for answers. I have had so many people come up and say, 'this is great, how do I get into this? How do I get involved?' That has been my experience the last four years.

What is Athletes in Action?

Hicks — It is the Athletic Ministry of Campus Crusade for Christ (whose headquarters are in San Bernardino, California). We have two wrestling teams. The team we just brought to Lancaster split off from a team we had in Oklahoma City. This is our East team, the one in Oklahoma City is our West team. We also have two basketball teams (in Indianapolis and Phoenix), four weight-lifting teams (in Tulsa), a track team (in California) and we are starting a gymnastic team to give exhibitions in high schools.

Why did you select Lancaster?

Hicks — It is a good location, close to metropolitan areas, and we think it will be a community receptive to what we stand for.

Where will you be wrestling this season?

Turner — We have an All-Star match against F&M and Millersville. We have matches at the University of Alabama, Florida, East Carolina, Cincinnati, Appalachin, Northeast Missouri, Western Illinois, Northwestern, Buffalo, Shippensburg, Northern Michigan and Massachusetts. We sometimes get a guarantee (\$400) or a percentage. We travel in large vans or a station wagons. Right now we are looking for a Christian auto dealer who could lease two or three vans at cost. Our wives travel with us. They are active in campus ministry too, speaking at sororities and churches. Our wives receive training the same as we do. They can conduct neighborhood Bible studies and get involved in local churches.

Did you have any misgivings when you entered Athletes in Action?

Hicks — I was skeptical. Frankly, I was sort of shocked; I didn't see how it was going to work out but I felt I should try. I had become a Christian just before my senior year at college. At that time I was a very immature Christian. All of my friends were not Christians. Half of my professors were atheists or agnostics. I thought, well, if you are an educated guy or a success in life you just don't need Christ.

Then how did you feel about standing up and being counted?

Hicks — I thought if we go on a campus and wrestle and then stand up at a wrestling match and tell these people about Christ

they are going to laugh. I had tried to talk to my coach about it and he just laughed me off. But what I didn't know is that people really are hungry about this if you present it in a logical way. Once I got over my first time and actually stood up and talked, well, I was sure.

What response do you usually get from spectators at a wrestling match?

Hicks — We have a comment card we pass out and after we speak they are to respond on the card. And we have gotten very few negative comments. We found out that people weren't offended. Athletics is a medium people identify with. They say if this guy is a tough wrestler and he needs Christ maybe I do too.

You have said that Athletics in Action present their views in a pleasing or logical way. What is that way?

Hicks — It is presenting it not from the church angle or from the I-am-holier-than-thou angle. It is presenting it from the personal angle; a person talking about what Christ has done to my life. We tell them how they can have a personal relationship with Christ. We know they will get into church if they understand what is going on there, and they will get involved in social issues. We talk about the man Christ, not about religion or philosophy or church. This is why I think people don't get offended. Even if you aren't a Christian I think everyone respects the man Jesus.

The organization of Athletes in Action, could this be considered a part of the Jesus Movement, perhaps a trend such as the Jesus Freaks?

Hicks — I think so. In Campus Crusade we are committed to what we call a spiritual revolution. Not a violent one, but an inward one, a revolution of love and reason. We are committed to this, and a lot of other good organizations are too. John Lennon said recently that the whole revolution trip is out; now it's finding your self. It's even greater today because kids are looking within. That's why the drug scene is so big. They're trying to find answers. This helps us because in general they are much more open today than they were five years ago. People are willing to listen. They can sense we found something.

You say people will listen, but will they do anything more than that?

Hicks — It depends on the group of kids you are talking to. If you are in the grossest fraternity at Penn State you are not going to get as much response there as you are at a high school. We find a good percentage of kids, and we teach them how to pray. We tell them if you want to commit your life to Christ now you can. We follow up as much as we can by mail, or our staff or some local person contacts them. Of that percentage maybe 40 per cent of those people get involved somewhere. We are not trying to get people to join us especially. We realize we are only a small part of a worldwide thing. If we can get a person excited about Christ and committed to Him and willing to be trained we've got something. It doesn't matter where he gets involved.

How does Athletes in Action differ from the Fellowship of Christian Athletes?

Hicks — The main difference is that we are at this fulltime. You could not be full time with us and work with them. However, we help each other. Here in Lancaster the situation is really great. (The Lancaster Chapter of FCA has given Athletes in Action \$150). We are going to help FCA Huddle Groups. We are going to speak and maybe help train some of their guys. They have the people ready. They help us in the sense that they have people prepared to listen and contacts in the community that we need. Our goal is the same, to win people to Christ. We



SUE HICKS, wife of Athletes in Action during a morning study session in a local church. Neil Turner, former coach at Stevens Trade School, is at left center in striped shirt.

are fulltime, they work at it through their jobs.

Neal (Turner) you coached here before you became involved in Athletes in Action. Now you have come back, a 'changed' man. Are you accepted? How do you respond when people say, "Hey, that Turner really found religion?"

Turner (laughing) — I tell them, my life has been changed. Most people who aren't Christians or who criticize Christianity have never examined the claims of Christ, have never really read the Bible. I never really did. I went to Sunday School and church and lived the kind of structured life I thought Christianity was supposed to be. That was it. Now I can say to the critics, He has changed my life from within. I still think athletics are important, but I think my commitment to God is the most important thing. The thing I am most interested in as a coach is the change of the boy from within. Something I like to challenge a coach with is: 'What has happened to your boys after their competition? Can you honestly say that what you gave them from athletics was permanent enough for them to base their life on?' I know the answer because I coached for 10 years and I saw the results.

Did the change come easily?

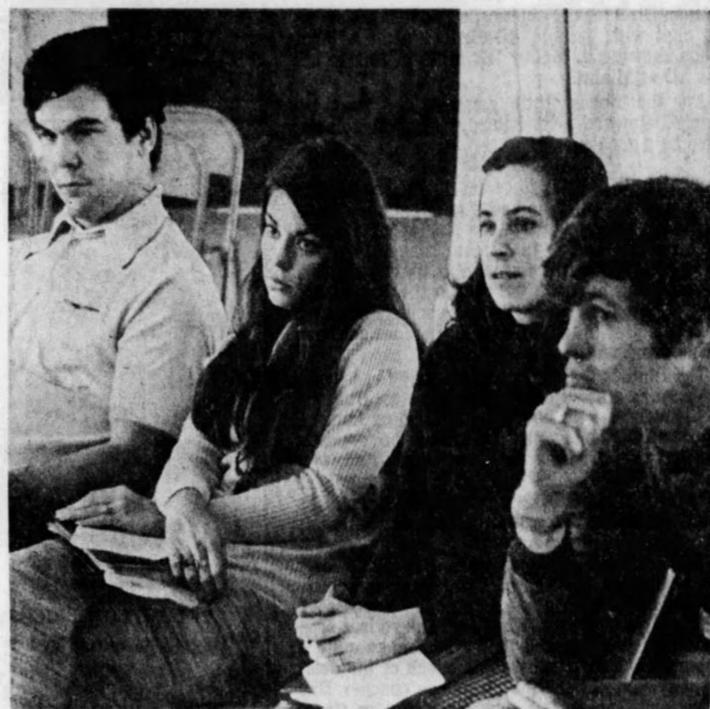
Turner — It was not too hard because anytime I was committed to something I was committed. I am not sure whether I was a Christian before November of 1970 or not. I certainly wasn't verbal about it. Had I been I would have been accused of being hypocritical. There were some real inconsistencies in my life. What I expected from my men and the life I was living didn't coincide. That was one of the things that caused me, in a self-examination, to realize that the very characteristics I was praying that would be available to my athletes were not prevalent in my own life. That's when I made my commitment. I wrote a letter to Athletes in Action and told them we felt we'd like to get into this type of work.

There must be those who have made a commitment to Athletes in Action but then realized it was not for them?

Hicks — This is our fifth year and we have found there is a lot of difference in accepting Christ and becoming a Christian and then becoming His disciple. We have two have left with the feeling that this is just had a number of guys on our team and only too much. Both cases were our fault because we were more interested in recruiting men for weight classes (in wrestling) than meeting his needs. Some others have left, but they have gone on to fulltime Christian work or teaching.

What if you are married, and your wife may not see things as you do?

Hicks — Well, sometimes it is difficult for the wives. The athlete will say, this is for



HUSBANDS AND WIVES attend the morning meetings of Athletes in Action. In a session here are Bob and Lynn Kuhn and Brian and Marian Dameier.

me; the wife will say she's not so sure. We have found in recruiting that the wife tends to think of security much more than the man. The wife can commit herself to this kind of work, but when it comes to raising your own support they start thinking what if our check doesn't come in. We tell them, if either of you is not completely committed, don't come in.

How do you finance your family?

Hicks — Mostly it is a matter of how much you trust God. The Crusade does not subsidize us. They have an \$8 million budget, (and a 3,500 man staff), that get it the same as we do, by trusting in God to raise it from people. We go out and speak, we get some from our wrestling matches. We raise it from friends and churches. There are times we do have problems. We can give someone time off to go home and raise money. If it persists he can get a leave of absence. We felt that is one of the ways God tells us to move out, if we can't make it financially. It's a good way; it is very tangible.

Neal, you had taught and coached for a number of years before you joined. How did this affect you financially?

Turner — I had to use my own money when I started. We took our savings and used them to get us to California and go in training (for Athletes in Action) there. Some people go to churches or friends and tell them they need say \$500 to go into training to get started. It's like Christ said, "Sell what you have and follow me."

What do you hear from church groups? Do you get flak from people saying "You're too conservative for us."

Hicks — We've gotten it from both groups, from conservatives saying we are too liberal or ecumenical or from liberals saying we are not interested in social issues.

We're doing what God wants us to do. It will take us all to win the world. Criticism is something you learn to take as Christians. I find that a person who criticizes our movement is one of who has never taken the time to try to understand it. Like Jesus said, "you prove that you are my disciples by the fruit you bear."

How far do you go to prove it? Would you carry a banner or wear a Jesus T-shirt?

Hicks — It depends on the people. In Munich (he was there accompanying two Athletes in Action wrestlers who were on the U.S. team), they had a Jesus march downtown and we carried signs. The signs said things like: 'Jesus Is Lord, Have Christ In Your Heart.' From my conservative collegiate background, I felt kind of strange doing that, but I know it had a purpose. Now if I went to a fraternity I wouldn't dare do that because I want them to relate to me as a college graduate. It's like Paul said, "I'm all things to all men that I might win some to Christ." Our message doesn't change much, but our approach may change."

You spoke to the Lancaster Quarterback Club. What did you tell them?

Turner — How we accepted Christ and how it changed our lives. We like to talk with coaches. You reach one coach and you reach thousands of boys over the years. Most coaches like having Christian athletes but they never look at their own life because they are so committed to athletics there isn't room for anything else. When I was coaching in college there was hardly room for my family let alone anything else. I think coaches like the byproduct of God working in a man's life, so it would be better if we (coaches) live this life ourselves. If we are going to lead men it is better to say, 'Let go,' then it is to say, 'Let's go get 'em.'

The Members Of The Team

There is a coach and 11 members in the Athletes in Action group in Lancaster. Neil Turner, the coach, is a native of Clearfield and a graduate of Penn State. He has a wife, Marcella, and three children ages 10, 5 and 3.

Greg Hicks, who also wrestles, is the director of the team. He is a native of Greensboro, N.C., and a graduate of North Carolina State. His wife Sue is a graduate of Croft Business College.

Six members of the team are married. Team members are: Kyung McChang of Korea, Dick Pollock from Waynesburg College, Reid Lamphere from the University of

Minnesota, Art (and Sue) Holden from the University of Wisconsin (Whitewater), Brian (and Marian) Dameier from Louisiana State, Bob (and Lynn) Kuhn from the University of Pittsburgh, Henry (and Linda) Shaffer and a two-year-old son, from Clarion State, Mike McCready from the University of Northern Iowa, Steve Gaydosh from Springfield, (Missouri) College, and Sam Hieronymus from Washington State.

The group attends Bible study classes each morning and trains in the afternoons. They have opened a temporary office at Park City and expect to move into a permanent office there in about a month.



WRESTLING TEAM which represents Athletes in Action. Front row, left to right, Art Holden, Steve Gaydosh, Reid Lamphere, Dick Pollock, Kyung

Muchang. Back row, Greg Hicks, Henry Shaffer, Bob Kuhn, Brian Dameier, Mike McCready.