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## Faith, Love and Football

### Chicago Bears Owner Hopes for More Than Winning

**PATRICK MCCASKEY** is a co-owner of the Chicago Bears professional football team.

He has recently started an organization called Sports Faith International to highlight the important connection between sports and religion. A Chicago native and the grandson of one of the founders of the National Football League, George Halas, McCaskey is active on the speakers' circuit where he enjoys talking about his Catholic faith and the role it plays in his life as a busy sports executive.

He spoke with Register correspondent Jesuit Father Matthew Gamber.



*Your family business is professional football with the legendary Chicago Bears. How did that happen?*

My grandfather, George Halas, started the Bears in 1920. He played on the team for 10 years. He coached the team for 40 years. He was the owner of the team for 62 years until he died in 1983, at the age of 88. He left the team to his family. We are trying to extend his legacy. The Bears have nine championships, 13 retired numbers, 26 Hall of Famers, 75 Pro Bowlers and 695 victories.

*Can you tell us a favorite memory from your Catholic*

*childhood or teenage years?*

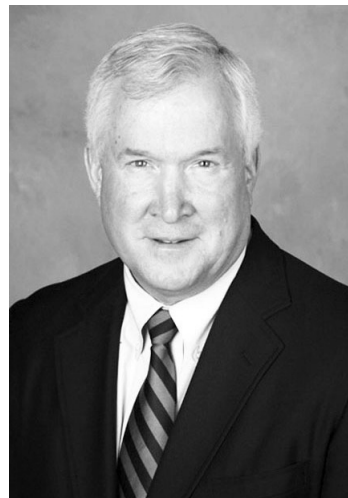
My parents wove a pattern of hard work and discipline for the lives of their children. They stitched this pattern with love.

My mother always found it amusing when someone asked her how much hired help she had. That was probably the reason my father nicknamed her "Laughing Girl." She did all the cooking and laundry and housework. The only real time she got a break was when she went into the hospital to have another baby.

During those refreshing interludes, Mrs. Passarelli took care of us. Instead of dinners of hamburgers or hot dogs, she prepared homemade pizza or spaghetti and meatballs. While waving a wooden spoon covered with meat sauce, she would yell, "You kids stop fighting." She never had to tell on us because my parents knew us very well.

There were many fights in our home, and my parents used belts, fly swatters, spatulas and pizza paddles as instruments of discipline. When my father's discipline was thought to be too severe, we buried one of his watches in the vegetable garden.

Our version of family planning was to have the children born during the Chicago Bears' off-seasons. We had seven victories and four ties. Six brothers



eventually shared a bedroom. Each brother had two and a half drawers. Everyone carved his initials on his drawers, but there were many fights over the halves.

Education was very important in our home, and chores were an essential part of our training. Grass had to be mowed, and snow had to be shoveled. Dog pens had to be cleaned, and vegetable gardens had to be cultivated.

My father was not a straw boss. He worked harder than any of his sons. When he cultivated a vegetable garden and found one of his watches, he could see the humor of the situation.

All of us were raised with discipline and love, and each of us was special.

*Is it true your mother, Virginia Halas McCaskey, has only missed one Bears game?*

My mother has missed more than one Bears game, including one to attend a grandchild's confirmation — letting him know God was more important than anything else. She is still mad at the bishop for scheduling the confirmation during a Bears game.

*Were you a football player or athlete?*

I was a normal Catholic boy: I wanted to play quarterback for the University of Notre Dame. I was on the 1966 Notre Dame High School varsity football team that was 9-0 and outscored opponents 341-80. I was the defensive signal caller, right outside linebacker, blocking back on the punts, and All-American quarterback. I was also a 4:37 miler. After high school, I had to give up playing football because of severe eye problems. So I ran cross-country at Cheshire Academy in Connecticut. I won several races, including the conference championship, set several records, and made All New England. After corneal transplants and cataract surgeries, my eyes are fine now, but I still can't play quarterback for Notre Dame.

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*You are part of an organization called Sports Faith International. What are its goals?*

Sports Faith International is a newly launched media initiative dedicated to utilizing traditional and new media to show the connection between sports and faith. Last February, my late grandfather, George Halas, Danny Abramowicz and Chris Godfrey were inducted into the Sports Faith Hall of Fame. On Saturday, Feb. 21, 2009, Well Mara, Dave Casper and Mike Piazza will be inducted into the Sports Faith Hall of Fame. We are also looking for Catholic high school athletes to highlight.

*What characteristics are you looking for in inductees to the Sports Faith Hall of Fame?*

What I would call the virtues of St. Paul: effort in competition, discipline, resilience, concentration, team work, sacrifice, fair play, respect for rules, confidence, determination, leadership and respect for oth-

ers.

*What do you do to keep your faith active and strong?*

I go to church and Bible study. There are 1,328 chapters in the Bible. If I read 26 chapters a week, I can read the Bible in 51 weeks and have a week off for spring break. Sometimes I have to read 100 chapters in order to get up-to-date.

*You have team chaplains and priests who travel with the team. How do the players respond to the presence of the clergy as part of the Bears?*

The players appreciate the clergy and the opportunities to have fellowship. We have Mass and chapel service four and a half hours before kickoff, home and away. We also have a players' Bible study on Friday afternoons after practice.

*Can you give an example or story of when you have been glad to have a priest with the Bears?*

After Communion before

Super Bowl XLI, the priests let me speak.

I said, "I was tempted to call former girlfriends and say, 'If you had married me, you could have gone to the Super Bowl.' Then I remembered that after Jesus rose from the dead, he didn't taunt the people who had rejected him. Let's win this championship with sportsmanship."

*Do you recall a time when as a team owner you have turned to prayer?*

Here is a Bears' prayer: "Bitterness is spiritual cancer. Forgiveness is spiritual rapture. Weather is a reminder that God is the boss. The Spirit strengthens us even after a loss. Jesus Christ is the Man; salvation is the plan. When we dance God's dance, he gives us another chance. God's work is efficient; his food is sufficient."

*How is "good sportsmanship" evident in the Bears and the NFL?*

We want to win championships with sportsmanship. We are hopeful that the world will not end until the Bears have the most championships. Sportsmanship is very important to us. In the National Football League, players from opposing teams meet at midfield after games and pray together.

*What advice would you give to a young athlete who wants to excel in his sport but also stay close to the Church?*

My advice is to go to faith-based schools on every level: grade school, high school, college and graduate school. At Catholic schools, I learned that good character and Gospel values are just as important as good grades. Athletic ability is a gift from God; one of the ways to thank God for it is to stay close to the Church.

*Father Matthew T. Gamber, SJ, is based in Chicago.*