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## The pastor as quarterback

*As the Super Bowl approaches, John James thinks about the leadership parallels between quarterbacks and pastors.*

by [John James](#)



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As the leader of a football team, a quarterback is the focus of attention in a way that's rare in sports -- or in any walk of life.

The audience is riveted on the QB. His name and his face are better-known than any other player's. Few spectators have personal experience playing in the position, but many have an opinion about the performance of their team's quarterback. Other players depend on his physical talent and his emotional preparation for the leadership role.

It may be that I've spent too much time thinking about stress and satisfaction among parish ministers, so that I see their story everywhere I look. But I think it's not too far-fetched to see a parallel between the leadership role of the quarterback and that of the pastor.

I'd never thought about quarterbacks quite this way until I recently watched the ESPN special "The Year of the Quarterback: The Kickoff." The 60-minute program is the first of a series exploring what it means to be a quarterback.

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The striking thing about the film is that it doesn't focus on winning games or throwing a football. Instead, it shows the years-long mental and emotional process of becoming a leader.

The ESPN filmmakers interview many quarterbacks, both famous -- Joe Namath, John Elway -- and unknown, including those in youth and high school leagues. Even at a young age, these boys notice that, as quarterbacks, they receive special treatment from peers and even from coaches and teachers. Some explicitly embrace the idea that with privilege comes responsibility, both on the field and in the community.

Throwing the ball and the other mechanical aspects of being a QB can be coached. But only through experience do the boys gain the mental and emotional maturity they need to be leaders. They learn how to respond to being booed, to being roughed up by the opposing team and to being doubted by teammates.

Quarterbacks become part of a distinctive fraternity and can derive comfort and moral support from their fellow quarterbacks, even players on other teams. Mentoring is important: a young player is well-advised to glean the wisdom of an experienced veteran. The wives of high-profile quarterbacks learn that their public visibility puts them under stresses they never anticipated.

When I consider the prominence of mentoring, peer support, on-the-job learning, public scrutiny and stress on spouses, the parallels between quarterbacking and ministry leap out at me.

Perhaps you find it absurd to compare football with the gospel. Sports are not easily compatible with the eternal goals and the countercultural, inclusive mission of the church. But if we can suspend our skepticism for a moment, let's consider what pastoral leaders might learn from the example of excellent quarterbacks:

**Quarterbacks embrace their interdependent status.** The most obvious lesson from ESPN's work is the importance of relationships. The wiser football leaders appreciate the ways the community affects and is affected by what the team does. Troy Aikman, formerly of the Dallas Cowboys, speaks of his development in terms of learning his teammates' various gifts, holding the team accountable and being accountable himself, then putting the ball in his teammates' hands and trusting them.

**Quarterbacks are present in the moment.** During the game, the quarterback must be acutely attuned to the team's situation, both strategic and emotional. It is a great gift of leadership to be able to say the right words at the right time, delivered with the right inflection, and to say enough but not too much. Pastors bring this power of presence as well -- in worship, in the sacraments and in the sacred moments they are privileged to share with the people they serve.

**Quarterbacks attend to fundamental practices.** For quarterbacks, this means weight lifting, cardio training and film study. For pastors, prayer, worship and other spiritual disciplines, as well as learning and serving in community, are the fundamentals of "training inwardly" for the Christian journey. Such practices strengthen both pastors and quarterbacks for the day-to-day emotional buffeting of leadership.

**Quarterbacks don't hide.** When things go wrong for their team, they step forward to absorb their share, or more, of the negative consequences. Elway tells ESPN that when his Denver Broncos suffered a loss, he felt that his duty as the public face of the team was to "bow his chest" and meet criticism. Perhaps this is a small lesson in [how to lead a Christian community](#), a group whose pattern of life is "a public witness to Jesus Christ," in the words of Kavin Rowe, Duke Divinity assistant professor.

**Quarterbacks take risks.** This is easier for football teams, especially at this time of year, when there's no point in playing it safe and waiting for tomorrow. But many leaders need to be reminded to push the envelope of risk from time to time and try something that makes them a little nervous.

The ESPN documentary tells the story of Steve Young, who could have played for almost any team in the league in the 1980s. But he joined the San Francisco 49ers, where he spent his first four years in the shadow of legendary quarterback Joe Montana. Young says he never would have knowingly agreed to such a delay; Coach Bill Walsh had led him to believe that a serious back problem would soon end Montana's career.

Young was frustrated and impatient. But instead of quitting, he used his time as backup to study and prepare. When he finally got his chance to lead, Young won a Super Bowl championship, as well as

several individual honors. To me, Young's story could be seen as the story of a calling; one might even wonder whether there was a providential hand at work behind Walsh's manipulation and Young's impatience, heartache and long-delayed fulfillment.

"Every bit of your self will be discovered in the endeavor to play quarterback," Young says today.

The same could be said of a pastor.