

“Pullin’ for the Big Guy?”

Even from an early age you could tell he was something special. While he was still in grade school some local chamber types got his daddy a job in the district. He was fast, strong and smart, destined for greatness. And their foresight paid off: four straight state championships and a passel of button-busting pride for the folks at the coffee shop; state tournament MVP, he was a high school All America his junior and senior years in high school, and on the A-list for all the great college programs. The family living room played host to some of the most famous coaches in the country, household names coming by to sip his mama’s lemonade.

Some athletes excel because they mature early, but after a while everybody catches up; not our boy. He kept growing. But there was never a point at which he was out of sync with his body. His gifts and discipline grew right along with him, game smarts and maturity well beyond his years. He *worked* at his game. “Coachable” is the word for kids like this: always confident, mind you, but always eager to learn and looking to improve. He had a gift, no doubt about it.

At the university they still speak of him in reverent tones. Three NCAA championships—so close on that fourth one!—made his time there the golden age. Nobody expected him back for his senior year. (What was the point?) But to him it was about loyalty, and the millions would wait until next year’s draft. And that’s the way it worked out. He was drafted as the second overall pick, and nobody can remember who was number one. But he turned a franchise around, both through the expectations he placed on himself and through the way he lifted his teammates to new levels. They began to believe in themselves.

And so did the fans. With time he grew into quite a showman—bit of a trash talker. Some of his opponents were offended for a while, but it was hard not to like him. Other teams’ fans hated him with a passion... but turned out in droves to watch him: hoping he’d fail, but filled with a grudging admiration when he didn’t. Mostly he didn’t. And the home fans worshipped him.

It was the Olympics that finally brought everybody together. Who wouldn’t want him on their side? In gold medal competition his greatness

really shone through. He became one of the most recognizable faces on the planet.

You know who this is, don't you? Actually, it could almost be a number of athletes, male or female, in a number of sports. The particulars are fictional, but the story is familiar. So let's give our hero a generic, heroic name. How about, "Goliath"?

"What?!" you say. "Goliath was a jerk, a bully, completely full of himself and everything we detest!" Well, to quote Lee Corso, "Not so fast, my friend!" Most of what we know about Goliath amounts to this: he was a winner. And the truth of it is, we love winners.

Oh, we love underdogs, too... but only when they win. The movie *Hoosiers* is a huge letdown if the final shot clangs off the rim. The 1980 US Olympic hockey team, the Lake Placid miracle on ice, is an historical footnote if they loose to the Russians in double overtime¹ and over-achieve to capture the bronze: "Do you believe in near-miracles?" There's a question nobody ever asks.

David is celebrated in today's story because he wins. Underdogs who get crushed don't even show up as highlights on Sports Center unless they're shown losing to Goliath. Trust me on this: I'm a Pittsburgh Pirates fan.

But of course the David and Goliath story is about more than sports, isn't it? Isn't it? It's a stylized battle of two national champions with thousands of spectators and spin doctors waiting at the ready to craft epic poems extolling the victor. It's a battle of civilizations... sort of like Boston vs. New York. Sports championships don't settle anything beyond next season, whereas great battles resolve great issues... or at least they set the stage for the next battle.

So what makes this story different? It's not just our country vs. yours, our language and civilization vs. yours. It's a clash of gods we've got going on here, their proxies staking theological claims. That's the point. David risks his young life, puts it all on the line, "... so that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel."

Isn't it amazing how much detail there is in this story? It is crafted with great literary skill, giving us insight into Goliath, David and Saul. At points it reads a bit like an opera, and we want them to stop singing and get on with it. When it arrives, the combat is stunningly abrupt, almost anti-

¹ Yes, I know, in those days a non-medal game would have stood as a tie. This is hyperbole.

climactic. And the suspense is accomplished with great intentionality by weaving together two earlier versions of the story. No wonder it captures our imagination.

Details... Goliath is immense. But I know what you're thinking: no way is he really six cubits and a span, right? Five cubits and a tad, tops! I agree! Six cubits and a span is nine and a half feet. Four cubits and a span would be about 6'6". That's tall enough for a giant in the ancient world. His coat of mail weighs five thousand shekels, 126 pounds. The head of his spear weighs 35 pounds. He's a big, strong boy. He works out. He's got greaves of bronze on his legs. If you had an axe you couldn't chop him down. And he knows full well the effect he has. Israel trembles. King Saul—remember he was chosen for his height—quivers in his tent.

Enter David. He's bringing lunch for his brothers, who are a part of the civilian militia that is Saul's army. It's hard to imagine that they were much on training and tactics, so morale was a huge factor. As David arrives the soldiers are moving forward to battle; or rather to line up across from the Philistines for the daily trash-talking session. It's taunting time, intimidation displays and Yo' Mama jokes at twenty-five paces. David leaves the lunch basket with the baggage guy and runs to find his brothers, just in time to hear Goliath go into his routine: "Yo Mama smells so bad the neighbors moved next to a hog lot for relief..." And then he caps it all off with, "Today I defy the ranks of Israel! Give me a man, that we may fight together!" Not only does this *not* frighten David, it makes him angry. This guy is talking trash to the army of the Living God. Call me names if you like, but leave God out of it. Are we going to let this guy get away with this stuff?

David goes to find the king, who is hiding under the bed in his tent with his blanky and his Tickle Me Elmo. David says, "Let no one's heart fail because of [Goliath]; your servant will go and fight with this Philistine."

The word "Philistine" has come down in English to mean something akin to bumpkin or representative of an inferior civilization, as in the Monty Python phrase, "Philistine pig ignorance." But this is all wrong. These people had bronze, and iron and sophisticated weaponry. The Israelites are the unknown, upstart entity here.

But David is undaunted. He portrays himself to Saul as a champion: I've dealt with lions and bears: what's a giant? (Just another football team.) But notice the basis on which David makes the appeal: it was God who

delivered him from the wild beasts. God will deliver him and all Israel from Goliath.

Saul acquiesces. But then he tries to get David all suited up in his armor. This scene is comical, but also telling. To fight Goliath, do you have to become Goliath? Do we have to fight fire with fire, terror with terror? David can't even walk with the armor on. That's not his game. So he abandons it in favor of five smooth stones and a sling, and he comes out to confront the giant.

As Bill Coffin loved to point out, it never occurs to Goliath to wonder what the kid has in the bag. It never occurs to him that a whole different sort of attack is in the offing. He sees David, that he's "ruddy and handsome," a pretty boy. He sees his shepherd's attire and thinks that maybe the kid will hit him with a shepherd's crook: "Am I a dog, that you come to me with sticks?" No, big guy, it's going to be a rock, and not even a pointed one, but coming faster than you can imagine. Goliath curses David by his Philistine gods, whom the narrative doesn't even bother to name, and he promises to feed David to the winged and four-legged scavengers. But actually a much larger meal awaits them.

David speaks last. And he, interestingly enough, mocks the symbols of Goliath's supposed superiority: "You come to me with sword and spear and javelin." Goliath has the size, and the strength, and the technology. He even has an armor-bearer. But David comes in the name of the LORD, YAHWEH, and for the first time in the whole story, the holy name is invoked. Goliath has defiled the LORD, and Goliath is about to learn his mistake. "The LORD does not save by sword and spear; for the battle is the LORD's, and he will give you into our hand." And that's the point; whenever we're afraid, the first thing we turn to is swords and spears. The first thing we try to do is to become Goliath, who is about to become bird food.

It takes one stone. And then Goliath, appropriately, dies by his own sword. And the story is over. Once the name of the LORD is invoked, it's over.

The fight reminds me of two movie fights: one from the first Indiana Jones movie where a fearsome figure confronts Indiana Jones in a market place and offers a remarkable display of martial arts preparedness. Jones pulls out a gun and blows him away. The other is from *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, in which Robert Redford pretends to count to three while Paul Newman kicks his much larger adversary in a particularly tender spot.

All three of these fights are one-sided because of the assumptions with which the adversaries begin. Goliath isn't fighting an unarmed adolescent. He's on the wrong side of God.

And so it isn't really David who wins, although David gets the glory and he's the one we tell the story about. The story is used to shine David's star. (Right: the star of David.) And the more it is told and retold, the more they sing about it and enshrine it in the national mythology, the more they take it to heart and keep telling themselves that they are the ones who are blessed by God and they are the underdog who can't be beaten... the more they become just like all the nations around them and David grows up into Goliath.

We love this story because the two characters seem such a contrast: arrogant man against innocent youth, big bully against courageous over-achiever, one depending on his brute force and the other living by his wits, one old and corrupt and the other pure, smooth-skinned and faithful. But the line between them is much finer than that. Not so many years ago Goliath started out as David, and now David is growing up into Goliath, and here they meet in this one moment of time that seems forever to define them both.

But the story isn't really about Goliath or even about David. It's a story that we tell to remember that there is a God in Israel, a God who isn't impressed by and does not rely upon swords and javelins and armaments—the things that we all of us want if only we think we can have more of them than the other guy.

An exercise we often do in Bible study is to ask participants where they see themselves in the story. Who are you? We all want to be David: pure and faithful and confident and on the way up. But we're also Goliath: trusting in our superiority, relying on our skills and weapons and forgetting where we came from. And we're also Saul, pacing anxiously in the tent and wondering how in the world we can deal with a defining moment that has made it abundantly clear that we are in way over our heads. We're all of them, all of the time, aren't we?

We're pulling for the big guy, fleeing from the crucial test, and trying to remember what it feels like to be sure there is a God in Israel. And there *is* a God in Israel.

Amen

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