

# The Longest Game

*Winning in Life*

ADAM BURT



Carpenter's Son Publishing

The Longest Game: Winning in Life  
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**To Cassie and Lizzy my "Baby Girls"**- I am so proud to call you both my daughters. As a Christian I don't believe in luck, but I can't help but 'feel lucky' to have such great girls like you. Because of you, I understand more fully God's unconditional love as a Father. You're never too grown up to hear these words, "I love you with all of my heart, no matter what, forever."

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**To Pastor Ron Lewis (The Bishop)**- thanks for being a mentor and a friend all these years. I remember early on in our relationship asking, "Why does this guy even like me?" I'm still trying to figure it out. Thanks for showing me that faith can be fun! Wherever you go there is always laughter and joy. Thanks for teaching me about the Grace of God-His unmerited favor and smile. You're a hero to me bro! Much love and thanks!

# FOREWORD

By Pastor Ron Lewis

Over breakfast in the late 90's, while reading the *Raleigh News & Observer*, I was thrilled to find out that a professional hockey team, newly named the Carolina Hurricanes, was relocating to our city from Hartford, Connecticut.

While reading this news I had a spiritual sense that I'd somehow be connected to this new team. A few days later, John Blue, a former goalie for the Boston Bruins, called to ask if I'd reach out to his friend and fellow hockey player, Adam Burt, defenceman for the Hurricanes.

I somewhat reluctantly called Adam, and remarkably, he answered. Not expecting an answer, I blurted out, "Hey Adam, welcome to Raleigh, how can I serve you?" The silent pause felt like an hour, then I heard him holler to his wife, "Susan, there's a pastor on the phone and he says he can serve us."

Turns out Adam was juggling multiple things having just moved his life and family to Raleigh. What began with airport runs, then meals together, became family friends and eventually lifelong ministry partners.

A few months after our first introduction, I asked Adam if he wanted to join me to speak at one of our campus ministries. Beginning his message that night I was surprised to notice this NHL'er who played before thousands every night, was actually nervous.

No one else saw it though, and Adam's first message was exceptional. He told that group of college students about being hit by a puck and for many days after seeing double. He compared his story to a message from Scripture saying, "A double minded man is unstable in all his ways."

Adam Burt the hockey player was clearly a leader, naturally gifted speaker, and to this day one of the best story tellers anywhere. We both sensed a second calling to come for him post hockey, one that would merge our lives even more deeply and demand a new kind of endurance for both of us.

While Adam was looking ahead and preparing for this next career of being a minister, he was still on the ice taking a barrage of hits, bruises and scars.

I'll never forget one of the calls I got from Susan. "Adam took a point-blank puck to the face," she told me. "He's got a bunch of stitches and is looking rough, but he'll be ok." Susan was always incredibly strong in these moments, and I thought I was too, until Adam walked into the living room. Standing upright with his usual perfect posture, he gave a slight smile. What I saw shook me to the core as I held back tears. Half of his face was caved in like Arnold Schwarznegger at the end of *Terminator 2*.

That was one of the worst injuries, but not the only or the last. I've marveled watching him overcome so many injuries and physical pain — More than 200 stitches, a broken jaw, a broken nose (several times), two cheekbone reconstructions, a knee reconstruction, a shoulder dislocation, five back surgeries, with multiple screws and plates holding together his internal skeleton. Strength of body, soul and spirit have helped this man endure.

After 14 years as a pro hockey player, Adam hung up his skates with great accolades and a deep calling to go into full-time ministry. His last game was at the iconic Madison Square Garden in midtown Manhattan. It was poetic justice that precisely one year later, he was preaching in the pulpit of the Lamb's Theater, on West 44th Street, exactly 10 blocks away from that final game.

Adam is just as facile with pulpits as with pucks, and with the help of our NYC based team, he helped launch one church in Manhattan and another just across the Hudson River in northern New Jersey, which he leads until this day.

The pain he absorbed as an athlete was not wasted and God has recycled his suffering to embrace countless pain-filled lives in New York City and in New Jersey. Adam the player became Adam the coach, the confidant, the shepherd and the teammate...to actors, Wall Street investors, Broadway celebrities, NYPD cops and NYFD firemen. A long-time chaplain for the NY Jets NFL team, Adam Burt has made an extraordinary impact for Christ in the most influential city in the world.

The secret to his giftedness in ministry is that just like on the ice, he's raw and real. Deeply grounded in biblical theology he makes you laugh one minute, and cry the next. His gifts of talent, heart, and intellect have helped countless souls find their way to the grace and mercy of God.

While my first phone call was an offer to serve him, Adam has stood by me in some of my darkest personal moments...a painful divorce, the loss of my 23 yr old son, and in happier times as a groomsman in my wedding and true co-laborer in the tough but rewarding fabric of NYC.

His life exemplifies true grit, true loyalty, and true discipleship. He's relatable, hilarious, pursues underdogs to build them up, and is faithful to the core. He'll never give up on a friend or his family. As you read this book, I'm certain you'll love getting to know his heart and deep insights like I do, and that the pain through which he's persevered will benefit you too. This book will help you get to know God and discover your God-given purpose. I couldn't put it down.





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# INTRODUCTION

I played this game a million times over in my head. As a kid growing up in Detroit, my driveway doubled as some of the world's most iconic hockey venues. There I am, on the ice. Of course the game is tied. I can hear the roaring crowds, my teammates shouting, and then the play by play in my mind: "It's the Stanley Cup playoffs, sudden death overtime! Adam Burt has the puck as the time is ticking down. Three, two, one . . . he shoots . . . HE SCORES!!" It always ends the same. We win!

It's funny how real life is always a bit more complicated than that. Fast-forward several years later, I was about a decade into my NHL career, playing for the Philadelphia Flyers. Our team was stacked with All-stars and future Hall of Famers. We had a solid year, clinching first place in the final game of the regular season. We rolled through our first round playoff opponent, the Buffalo Sabres, winning the best of seven series four games to one.

Our next opponent was our in-state rival, the Pittsburgh Penguins. We dropped the first two games on home ice, leaving our team and fans stunned. The series headed back to Pittsburgh for games three and four. Game three was a back and forth battle. At the end of regulation the score was knotted up at 3, and we went to sudden death overtime. Next goal wins. In my driveway as a kid, I don't recall being quite as nervous as I was in real life—like, I might throw up kinda nervous. This was way more intense than I could have imagined. The game ping-ponged back and forth. Finally at 11:01 of the first overtime, my defense partner, rookie Andy Delmore, rifled a shot from the point and scored! We won and were right back in the series.

Two nights later, we were back at it for game four. It's a night I will never, ever forget. The game itself took seven hours to complete. It started at 7:35 p.m. and didn't finish until 2:35 a.m. (For the record, my wife fell asleep during the game!) A regulation hockey game is three periods long. We played eight and a half periods. Almost three complete games. It would become an "ESPN Classic" and go down in the record books as the longest game in the modern era.

The game was a tight checking affair, and at the end of regulation we were tied at one goal apiece. When you're on the ice, everything is happening so fast you don't have time to be nervous or think about what's at stake. But in between periods, during the intermission, that's when you had to keep your nerves in check. There was a tug-of-war going on in my head. I wanted to be the hero pretty bad, but equally as bad, I didn't want to be the guy that screwed up and lost the game for us.

The first overtime intermission was extremely tense. The locker room was silent. Eerily silent. Each player knew one mistake could cost us the game and possibly the series. That silence was broken by forward Keith Jones. Keith was a great teammate and leader, but he despised working out and lifting weights. He had the body to prove it: a "dad bod." As shirtless Keith Jones rose to his feet, he announced to the room, "Men, I have something to say." All eyes locked on Keith. He panned the room to be sure he had everyone's attention and declared, "*It's official . . . I've decided I'm going to start working out next season!*" The room erupted in laughter. The tension broke. It was as if someone gave us permission to have fun again. The weight lifted, and we were free to play our game.

As the game progressed well into the night, several of our key players were violently cramping due to dehydration. Our locker room looked more like an *emergency room*. The training staff hung IV bags as some players received intravenous fluids. Not only were guys getting tired, we were getting *hungry*. Our training staff eventually had to order a dozen pizzas during one of the intermissions. I imagine the

pizza deliver guy would have thought a dozen pizzas at 1:00 a.m. was going to a frat party, not to an NHL playoff game! Who knew a plain cheese pie could ever taste so good.

I believe it was Hall of Fame football coach Vince Lombardi who said, "Fatigue makes cowards of us all." Fatigue was setting in, and exhaustion was trying to rob us of our will to win. How you handle moments like that determines whether you win or lose. Will you GIVE IN? Or will you GO ALL IN? I don't remember who started it, but one by one players looked to their right and left and asked the guy next to them one simple question, "Do you need to be anywhere tonight?" To which each man responded, "Nope. I got nowhere else I'd rather be. I can play all night if that's what it takes! Let's go!" At that moment, I knew we were all in. We were going to win or die trying.

Finally, at roughly 2:35 a.m., after five and a half periods of sudden death overtime, center Keith Primeau grabbed the puck and skated up ice with a full head of steam. He crossed over into the Pittsburgh zone, eluding one defender and then another. The game seemed to go all *Matrix* like into slow motion. He let a shot fly. The puck whizzed by the Pittsburgh net minder and hit the metal crossbar of the goal. To this day I can still hear the deafening "PING!" the puck made when it hit the crossbar and dropped over the goal line. It was over! We won! Our entire team flooded onto the ice to celebrate. The exhausted Pittsburgh fans and players exited the arena in defeat, while we all hugged and high-fived one another. What a moment. As I left the ice to head back into our dressing room, a profound sense of gratitude started to well up inside of me. It was tangible, overwhelming. I had been a part of something significant, something historic.

Back in the locker room the victory celebration continued with Gatorade baths and several superlatives that probably aren't appropriate for this book. Before taking off my sweat-soaked equipment, I looked around the room at each player, physically exhausted, yet strangely energized. It was then I realized how deeply soul satisfying it is to give everything you have and come out on top. To battle and to

bleed. To pour every ounce of strength into something you believe in. Afterwards, you can look your teammates in the eye and honestly say, “I left it all out there for you. I held nothing back.” There is something powerful and real when you can do that. It’s almost spiritual. I want that for you.

You may never lace up a pair of skates or put on a hockey jersey. But make no mistake about it. You are a part of an epic game—the *game of life*. Nobody knows how long their game will last. We can only take it moment by moment, day by day. Living each moment as if it were your last, holding nothing back. And when it’s your time, there will be this deafening “PING!” The game will be over. You will stand before your Creator and, I pray, you will be able to look into His glorious face and say, “I left it all out there for you. I held nothing back.” In that moment, all the ridiculous things we think are so important will fade into the background of eternity as you hear these words: “*Well done, My good and faithful servant. Enter into your Master’s joy.*” I want that for you. I want you to win in the game of life.

A few short years after that epic game, I was forced to retire due to multiple back surgeries. What was next in the game of life for me? Broadcasting? Business? Have you ever heard the saying, “*If you want to make God laugh, tell Him your plans*”? Pastoring a church was not on my radar. In fact, early in my NHL career, a local newspaper did an article on me and my Christian faith. (Back in my day, to find a Christian in the NHL was rare. I mean, you were more likely to find a unicorn or an Oompa Loompa than find a Christian in the NHL.) The article ended with something my wife and I still laugh about to this day, “Maybe Adam will be a pastor someday.” To which my wife replied, “I will never be married to a pastor!” SURPRISE!! I became a pastor. (By the way, never tell God what you won’t do.)

In 2003, I helped start a church in Manhattan, alongside my pastor and mentor Ron Lewis. The church grew, and I grew along with it. Several years into my tenure at the church, one of the New York Jets football players showed up on a Sunday morning. He was a massive

man and stood out among the normal crowd. I introduced myself and asked his name. “Kenyon Coleman,” he replied. After the service, Kenyon approached me and suggested something I never saw coming: “You should be our team’s chaplain.” I was stunned and a bit skeptical, but I gave him my number. Honestly, afterwards I didn’t think much about it.

A few days later, I received a call from one of the New York Jets coaches. He invited me to come and “try out” for the team chaplaincy role. Try out? How do you try out to be an NFL football chaplain? Just think *American Idol* for pastors? I was brought in to the team’s facility along with a few other “contestants.” We had to preach our best sermon to a handful of Jet’s players and then they voted on their favorite. See what I mean by *American Idol*? Apparently I did all right because I got the gig and have been with the Jets for the past 16 seasons.

I mention all this not to “humble-brag” but to highlight the unique and unusual path God has laid out for me. This journey has afforded me a front row seat to the greatest athletes on the planet. NHL and NFL athletes are the top 1 percent in the world, the very best at what they do. And yet I have witnessed that, for all the fame and fortune that comes along with pro sports, it can never fully satisfy the human heart. We were created for something far bigger. We were created for a relationship with God. It’s how we win in the game of life. I want that for you. I want you to win.

This book will be broken down into three sections. In section 1, “Missing the Mark,” we will look for answers to life’s most important questions. Section 2, “Training to Win,” will explore the nonnegotiables of playing the game of life. “Playing to Win,” section 3, examines strategies for getting into the game.





# SECTION 1

## **“MISSING THE MARK: ANSWERING LIFE’S BIG QUESTIONS”**

*I press toward the mark for the prize of the  
high calling of God in Christ Jesus.  
(Philippians 3:14 KJV)*

I’ve heard it said, “The worst kind of failure is succeeding at the wrong thing.” I think Olympic rifleman Matt Emmons would agree. During the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens, Greece, Emmons held a commanding lead and was cruising towards gold in the 50-meter three-position event. Facing the final target, he eyed the mark and took a deep breath. He exhaled and pulled the trigger. BULLSEYE! The crowd’s reaction, however, didn’t quite fit the moment. Rather than hearing cheers there was a gasp! He hit the target dead center, but it wasn’t his target. It was his competitor’s. Emmons plummeted to eighth place and lost the gold medal.

This story does have a silver lining. Later that evening, Matt went out to a local pub in the Olympic Village to drown his sorrows. As he

ordered a pint, another Olympian sat down at the bar beside him and offered a few words of consolation. HER name was Katarina Kurkova from the Czech National sharpshooting team. The two hit it off, and a few short years later they were married. He lost the gold, but got the girl! [1]

Missing the mark hits a little too close to home for me. I missed the net. A WIDE open net! It was during the longest game, and to this day, I mentally replay that moment over and over again. It was midway through the fourth overtime. Teammate Keith Manderville brought the puck into the Pittsburgh zone, drawing two defenders to himself. I jumped into the rush, and somehow the puck found its way onto my stick. The goaltender was out of position, I had a wide-open net. The game was mine to win. I was going to score and be the hero. The only thing I could NOT DO was miss the net. I missed the net.

Missing the net in a game is tough. But missing the mark in life is devastating. It can happen to the best of us. The Apostle Paul was one of those guys. He was excelling at all the wrong things. Aiming his life at the wrong target. He was religiously checking all the boxes. As he says in his own words, he was:

*circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. (Philippians 3:5-6 ESV)*

Winning at the wrong things left him empty, self-righteous and hard hearted. He admits:

*I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a violent man.  
(1 Timothy 1:13 BSB)*

But something happened on a Damascus road. He had an encounter with Jesus Christ, and his life would never be the same. It was a miraculous course correction. Setting his sights on a new target. Paul says:

*I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in  
Christ Jesus. (Philippians 3:14 ESV)*

And with a refocusing of his life, Paul would absolutely change the world. Stop for a moment on your own road and ask this question: Are you aiming at the right mark?

I'm a huge fan of the game show *Family Feud*. You've probably seen it, so you know host Steve Harvey is hilarious and tells it like it is. One particular episode stands out to me. Harvey begins with his usual, "Top five answers on the board," and then he poses the question, "Name something that begins with the word 'pork.'"

The contestant immediately chimes in, "Cupine, Steve!" Harvey looks a bit confused, "What?" Undeterred, the contestant confidently repeats, "Cupine, Steve!" Harvey is like, "What is a 'Cupine?'" The contestant puffs out his chest and replies like he is Albert Einstein, "Cupine, Steve... 'Pork-Cupine'....you know, like a 'porcupine.'"

Harvey's bewildered look is priceless. And then, right on cue, the contestant's team responds the way they always do . . . THEY LIE! "Good answer! Good answer!" No, it's not! It's a dumb answer and everyone knows it. Steve can't help himself and says as much: "You're the only one that thinks that's a good answer." The team then doubles down on the dumb answer and says, "It's up there, Steve! It's gonna be up there!" Surprisingly, he agrees, "It's gonna be up there all right . . . on YouTube because it's so dumb!" If you were wondering? No, it wasn't on the board. It was a dumb answer. [2]

Is it just me, or are there some really dumb answers being thrown around today? Some of life's most difficult questions are getting "Cupine!" answers. They're dumb, but for some reason we feel all this pressure to agree and applaud, "Good Answer, Good Answer." I truly believe there is only one "Good Answer" to life's biggest questions and that answer is Jesus.

I'm not saying every other answer is completely wrong. But if you're "kinda wrong" or completely wrong, does it really matter? Either way, you are wrong.

C. S. Lewis highlights my point:

If you are a Christian you do not have to believe that all the other religions are simply wrong all through. If you are an atheist you do have to believe that the main point in all the religions of the whole world is simply one huge mistake. If you are a Christian, you are free to think that all these religions, even the queerest ones, contain at least some hint of the truth. When I was an atheist I had to try to persuade myself that most of the human race have always been wrong about the question that mattered to them most; when I became a Christian I was able to take a more liberal view. But, of course, being a Christian does mean thinking that where Christianity differs from other religions, Christianity is right and they are wrong. As in arithmetic—there is only one right answer to a sum, and all other answers are wrong; but some of the wrong answers are much nearer being right than others. [3]

Deep down inside, all of us are asking some version of these four questions:

1. Who am I?
2. Why am I here?
3. What's wrong with the world?
4. How can it be fixed?

In the marketplace of ideas, I believe Christianity answers these four questions best. It's hitting life's "bullseye." In section one, we will tackle each of these four questions in separate chapters. In the end, I hope and pray you too will come to the same conclusion. Jesus is the answer. I want you to hit your mark. I want you to win in the game of life.