

“Echoes of the Heart”

Reflections on Life and Community Living

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Why male athletes struggle with retirement. Has there ever been a more overly-hyped happening in professional sports than the Brett Favre *coming-out-of-retirement* saga? My spouse can't believe it. As I'm watching the nightly ESPN sports highlights, the Favre story will once again come on and she'll comment: *Are they still talking about him?*

I think she has a point.

As many of you know, Favre, a three-time National Football League MVP, has been one of the greatest quarterbacks in NFL history. As recently as last year, at age 38, he came oh-so-close to leading his team into the Super Bowl, the ultimate spectacle of American sports.

As the season ended, and on top of such an outstanding year, Favre, his body no doubt wearied by the constant pounding, began to think that retirement sounded pretty good. What better time to go out than when you've been at the top (or near the top) of your game?

As with many aging athletes, Favre had been wrestling with retirement notions for a few years. As we saw with the incomparable Michael Jordan (who came back at least twice), it's not always easy for the *great ones* to hang it up and move on to other things. This is particularly the case, it turns out, when *other things* simply can't compare to the buzz, the thrill and the daily routine of professional sports (particularly team sports).

I can still do it! Part of what happens to us men, as retirement beckons, is that we still think we can do it. The mind plays games on us. A voice keeps sounding off inside us: *You can still do it! You're still good enough!* And then, later: *one more year, one more year.*

Of course, when the athlete is saying this to himself, it's usually months after the season has ended and both the physical pain (from the long season) and the memory of the day-in-day-out drudgery are long forgotten. *Hey, we think, it's training camp; time to get ready for the season.*

For many retiring athletes, the bottom line is, *we miss it.* And who can blame us; that's all we've ever done.

To further complicate things, as the years wear on, we think we're better than we are. It is a huge adjustment for us to admit the decline in performance that is so obvious to those who observe us day after day. In this sense, we have trouble letting go. The occasional *great moment* keeps playing games with our mind and spirit and it sucks us along.

The question for someone like Brett Favre eventually becomes, *does the appeal of playing outweigh the appeal of going out on top?* At this juncture, Favre's answer seems to be a resounding *yes*. However, after a few months back (if that, in fact, happens), he may change his mind and the appeal of retirement may win the day once again.

Moving on and the meaning of life. For many of us, in all realms of life, retirement can come too soon and leave us grasping for a new sense of meaning and life-purpose. More and more, retirement-age people are asking: *if I like what I'm doing, why should I retire? To do what?*

That may well be what happened to Brett Favre. After a few months on the golf course and around the house, perhaps the doldrums began to set in.

Men struggle with retirement because, often times, our identity as a human person is vicariously linked to our vocation. Our vocation and our life are interwoven, overlapped and—together—define who we are. To suddenly *not* be able to play or sell or teach or minister or, whatever it is, would spell a too-sudden change for our spirit.

One of the keys for us men is to begin nurturing other interests before the retirement bell sounds. Any of us can branch out and dabble in new adventures and new challenges.

Moreover, beyond doting on our families, there are always any number of service-related opportunities where our experience and skills would be invaluable.

When the opening whistle, once again, signals the beginning of football season, wherever Brett Favre is (he was apparently traded to the New York Jets today); whether he's playing football again or not, I hope he comes to know a quiet serenity, an acceptance from within—a reminder, too, that there *is* life after game time. We need only seek it, find it, and live it.