

Earl F. Kauffman, "Playing the Games," in *Finding God at BYU*, ed. S. Kent Brown, Kaye T. Hanson, and James R. Kearl (Provo, UT: The Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2001), 242–53.

Let virtue garnish thy thoughts unceasingly; then shall thy confidence Wax strong in the presence of God (D&C 121:45).

Playing the Games

Earl F. Kauffman

Earl F. Kauffman was born in Wiesbaden, Germany, where his father was stationed with the United States military. His mother is a native German. He was reared in San Antonio, Texas, where he played soccer and became a kicker on the high school football team. As a student at BYU, he played on the football team and was named to the All-WAC team as a punter, received WAC honorable mention as a place kicker, and received votes for All-American as a punter. He graduated with a bachelor of science degree in health and worked as a counselor in a treatment facility for troubled youth. Currently he works for the Department of Corrections of the state of Utah as a counselor in the long-term unit at a state youth correctional facility. Mr. Kauffman is married to Tara Laws, and they are the parents of four children. They live in Lehi, Utah.

Why did I come to BYU? It's a long story. I graduated in 1988 from Converse Judson High School in Converse, Texas, near San Antonio. In high school I had a talent for kicking the football, although before high school I had never played the game. I grew up playing soccer. My parents counseled me, "Wait until you are older, bigger, stronger before you go into a sport where you might get hurt." However, I played football as a high school freshman and liked it. When I reached the next level, I was hesitant since I really wanted to go to college, and I thought I should drop football and focus on my grades. But when the school year started and I watched our team struggle, I told my dad that even though I made a commitment not to play, I wanted to. He told me that he'd support my decision and that I should call the coach.

I immediately earned a starting position, had a successful high school career, and received a lot of publicity. Then the recruiting started. Different colleges expressed interest in me as a kicker. My first thoughts were that I wanted to go to Nebraska or to Penn State. The only thing I remembered about BYU was the National Championship in 1984. I was one of those people who thought it was a fluke and that BYU shouldn't have won it. I was basically a skeptical national fan. But out of the blue, BYU began sending me letters.

My interests narrowed to schools that were willing to offer a scholarship. BYU was one of them, but I was hesitant to take a recruiting trip. I didn't want to go all the way to Utah. My dad counseled, "Just take the trip. It's free. Enjoy yourself. It's a beautiful part of the country. There are Mormon people out there." I may have heard the word Mormon before, but I'm not sure. Dad's advice made me think twice. As I was recruited, news began circulating in the local papers about contacts from BYU. Surprisingly, friends who were LDS started saying, "We hear that you're thinking of going to BYU." They had probably told me in the past that they were LDS, but I had forgotten. Their interest raised my interest. I thought that looking more carefully at BYU would help me better understand the LDS culture. In the end, I took trips to BYU and two other schools.

When I first came to campus, I had a really good feeling. I loved the mountains. It was January or February, and snow was everywhere. At the other schools I visited my hosts took me to clubs or bars. In high school I didn't drink, so I wasn't particularly impressed. When I came to BYU on my recruiting trip, I also went to a nightclub, but it was different. There was no smoke. At home I loved to go dancing at country places, but I would come home smelling of tobacco. It was horrible. But at BYU it was nice. I also didn't smell alcohol on anyone's breath. I almost felt like a five-year old again. Everything seemed new and fresh.

Now as I look back I realize that I was feeling the Spirit. But at the time I was thinking, "Yes, this feels neat. BYU is a neat place." BYU felt like the university that I had pictured in my head as a kid, a place that is special. Students study seriously. There aren't people hanging out of windows at parties and the like. It has a special atmosphere. But I was still hesitant. I finally narrowed my choices to BYU and TCU. At the time I had developed the habit of prayer from watching evangelists on TV. I had learned how to open a prayer and close a prayer uttering Jesus Christ's name. I was praying regularly, knowing in my mind that if I kept asking enough, I could get things that I wanted. The official signing day was close. On the day I decided I had to make a decision, my dad was gone for the evening and I was home alone. I said a prayer. In front of me there was a BYU sticker and a TCU sticker. I prayed, "Heavenly Father, where should I go to school? I want to go to the right place and make the right decision." When I closed my prayer and opened my eyes, I saw the BYU sticker first. It simply stood out. So I grabbed the sticker, stuck it

on the counter top, wrote my dad a little note, “I’m going to BYU,” and went to bed. I didn’t think much about the spiritual effects of my decision then.

Between my signing in February and my arrival at BYU in August, my LDS friends from high school started seeking me out. One of them had told me about the Church’s moral standards. She said, “I don’t do this and I don’t do that, and this is why.” I remember thinking back to the year when we were sophomores. She would come into class, and I would joke with her, “Hey, Mormon girl, want to sin?”

In Texas the Church runs a lot of TV commercials. They seem to appear every fifteen minutes. In responding to one, I received a cassette called *Our Heavenly Father’s Plan*. I was expecting someone to talk about different principles and was disappointed when it turned out to be songs. I also got my own copy of the Book of Mormon. I had expected a manual which would list rule number one, rule number two, and so on. But when I opened it up, I saw scriptures like I had seen in the Bible. Unfortunately, the Bible had always intimidated me because I couldn’t understand it, so I closed the Book of Mormon, set it aside, and didn’t think much more about it.

The night before I left home to go to BYU, my friends said, “Don’t let those Mormons get you!” I said jokingly, “Oh, I won’t!” That was my intent. I would be a person outside the culture, looking in and checking everything out. As time went on, however, my curiosity got the better of me. Moreover, when I finally arrived at BYU, the feelings that I felt during my recruiting visit returned. One of the first players whom I met and became close with was the center, Bob Stephens. I can’t remember whether I asked a question or whether he engaged me, but I started half-heartedly asking about the Church. When I became bored with the conversation, I said, “Bob, if I ever decide to get baptized, I would like you to baptize me,” not thinking that I would ever do it.

Another influential person on the team was Keith Lever, a backup kicker. He was a really spiritual person. He was always willing to answer my questions. He became a great friend. I admired the traits he had. Among my character flaws was a foul mouth. I’m now embarrassed at the language I once used. I noticed how well Keith conducted himself. I had admired those who used clean language all my life but was never willing to make a change myself. Seeing his good traits, I started asking him questions. At some point, Keith gave me a *Gospel Principles* manual, and my reading led to more questions. I finally decided to open the Book of Mormon and read a little. I noticed how comfortable it felt compared to my effort to read the Bible. It was exciting.

There was a snowball effect. I would be in the weight room working out, and a question would pop into my head. I would say, “What about this principle?” Almost immediately there would be nine or ten guys by my side, and there would be a missionary session in the weight room. I was living in the dorms with a lot of young men who were preparing for missions. I was feeling the Spirit but not realizing what I was feeling. I would ask a question and the dorm room would fill up with guys wanting to practice the discussions. In fact, we used to joke around that I was a “dry Mormon,” a name they used to call me all the time.

My most influential classes were in religion. I could feel the Spirit in most of my religion classes, but I struggled because everything was so new. I had no knowledge of the Bible. So when I studied the New Testament, it was difficult. I was focused on learning religion as a general academic subject. I was trying to understand the information. It was that way with the Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants. But I had spiritual experiences in every class because of the environment. We could freely discuss the way we lived our lives. Brother George Pace was the teacher for my Book of Mormon class. I struggled. I didn’t want to go to him and say, “I’m not a member, I don’t know anything.” So I worked hard. But in the end I had to go to him and say, “I have no knowledge of this. It’s all brand new to me.” He responded with genuine kindness. He really worked with me. I learned a lot because of the approach he took in class.

When I signed with BYU, the coach who recruited me, Claude Bassett, said, “There are some LDS people in your area of Texas. If you need a summer job before you come to BYU, let me know and I will introduce you to them.” Eventually, I went to work for a man named Ron Kimball. I also met his daughter Tiffany. One night she asked me to go to a Church dance. In time, we became close friends. The second week after I arrived on campus, the Kimballs came to Utah for a visit. They introduced me to the Johnsons. The Johnsons were very nice and accepting of me. When Ron Kimball’s daughter moved to Syracuse, Utah, to live with her aunt and uncle, we would meet each other at the Johnsons’ home. To the children I was the “BYU football player.” They always insisted that their parents invite me over. So when Tiffany came to their house for dinner or for a family occasion, the Johnsons would always invite me. Because of the people I associated with at BYU, my personality did a full turnaround. My language started to change. Looking at photos of myself, I believe that I was changing in physical appearance as well.

When I went home for Christmas, I couldn’t get the Church out of my mind. I talked to my father about it. He was hesitant, thinking my interest was because of peer pressure, or the environment. He asked me to think about it for a while. But after I returned to school for the second semester I called my dad and said, “I really want to get baptized.” He responded, “Hold off for me. I want you to make sure this is what you want.” The semester ended and everyone went

home for the summer. It was a sad time for me because I realized that the friends I had made were going to be gone on missions the next year. I was going to come back almost as a new student again.

When I returned home at the end of my freshman year, I told my father everything I had learned. As I told him new things, he would come back the next day and ask, “Did you really say this?” My father has always questioned me to make sure I knew what I wanted. He would turn my interests around on me to see whether I genuinely wanted them and would defend them. If I held to my interests, he would support me. But this time the questioning went on all summer, and I came to the point where I thought that my dad was going to be disappointed in my decision to join the Church.

My father grew up a skeptic. His father would get him up on Sunday mornings and say, “You’ve got to go to church. You need church in your life. Here’s a dollar to put in the plate.” As a consequence, while my parents were married, we would go to church on Christmas Eve for Midnight Mass and occasionally at Easter. My mother was good at exposing us to religion. I remember as a young child she helped me develop the ability to see people who were doing right and people who were doing wrong. Looking back, my life seems to fit the analogy that I was a little matchbox car in Heavenly Father’s hands. He guided me through all the turns to bring me to where I needed to be, avoiding pitfalls that would have steered me from the Church. It was not always by my effort that I was able to avoid such things. As I look back, Heavenly Father had a plan for me: “No, Earl, you are going to avoid these things. I’m not going to hold your hand the whole way, but I will guide you in positive directions.”

The way I was raised also helped me to be receptive. My parents were very open. When I was young, my father sat me down, “You know son, you are getting close to high school. If you want to drink alcohol, let me know. I want to know these things. I’m not going to get after you if that’s what you choose to do. I just need to know.” I remember as a sophomore saying, “I want wine-coolers, Dad.” So he bought some. After a while, I thought it was dumb. But I had the opportunity. I can remember going to parties and friends would have their alcohol. I would carry a drink in my hand. But I would take all night to drink it. At a New Year’s Eve party, I finally told my friends, “I’m going to make a New Year’s resolution. I’m not going to drink again.” I saw no need for it. My parents encouraged me in this decision, and I went through high school known as the kid who didn’t drink. I actually enjoyed parties more than my friends did because I enjoyed watching them look stupid. There was something else that kept me where I was. I was deeply saddened to see a lot of girls let alcohol lead them into morality problems. They would come to me later and express their sadness and disgust. Hearing these regrets all the time affected my view of what life was all about.

All of the summer after my freshman year, I continued to pray and to do the right things. One morning toward the end of the summer, my father came in my room and said, “Well son, I thought that being in that environment had placed you under peer pressure, and that’s why you wanted to join the Church. I have hammered you all summer. There’s been nobody to back you up, and you are still defending your desire to go that route. You have my blessing. Go ahead.”

When I came back for my sophomore year, I contacted the missionaries. They said, “You need to take the lessons.” I responded, “I want to be baptized. You don’t need to waste your time.” I went through three or four lessons and then said I wanted to wait for my father to come to be part of the baptism. So I called my father and asked him what games he was going to come to and scheduled my baptism accordingly.

Bishop Gary Lundberg and his wife, Joy, were very influential when I came back to BYU for my sophomore year. The prior year I had gone to church with friends. Therefore I knew that church meetings were held at a certain time in the Martin Building. So I showed up one Sunday at the beginning of my second year. Bishop Lundberg was the new bishop. After a couple of Sundays, I told him that I was going to be baptized. I don’t think he knew I wasn’t LDS. We hit it off quickly. We came to enjoy a really strong relationship.

Another person who had a major impact on me was Chris Pella, the special teams coach. He is a very down-to-earth guy. He knew I wasn’t LDS, but he recruited me and was a fine example to me. Even though he scolded me when I became hotheaded on the field, when he didn’t have to wear his coaching hat he immediately took it off and was the friend, the father figure, the support. When we would see each other, he didn’t always ask, “How’s the leg doing?” Instead, he asked, “How are things going in school? How are things with Tara?” He always expressed interest in how my life was going, not just in football.

Coach LaVell Edwards also had an influence on me. As the head coach he could not focus on just one group of players. He had to get to know everybody. Even so, he was very supportive of what I was doing. He was the father figure to whom you knew you could always go. At first he was almost intimidating. When he came to my home and recruited me, I thought, “Wow! LaVell Edwards!” He has a rather stern look, and a person is not sure what to say to him. But as soon as he and my dad started talking, he was a totally different person, laughing and joking. Every time I walked by his office I would

glance in. He was “Head Coach LaVell.” Even so, I felt that I could go in anytime if I needed something. For his part, he would take the time to ask how things were going for me.

When I first came to BYU, the punter was Pat Thompson. He and I had similar punting techniques and the same build. Coach Edwards usually looks at the ground when he is walking. I would say, “Hey, Coach.” He would reply, “Hey, Pat, uh Earl.” For a long time I was “Pat, uh Earl.” I once had a conversation with him and saw him in a different light. I saw him more spiritual. He told stories about how he grew up. He grew up as a hard-nosed football player, doing those things that I did when I was younger. I could see myself in him. Like others who surrounded me, I came to see Coach Edwards as a person put in his place by the Lord to influence me, even if it was only for five minutes. Such individuals were all a part of the whole experience.

I was baptized in November. The baptism took place in the double chapel above BYU on Ninth East, now the home of the BYU Sixth Stake. So many people came that we filled the chapel. I felt great knowing I had so much support. At the baptismal font only close family came to the front. It was such a good feeling. Someone opened the curtain, and I looked up and saw my dad, and there were tears in his eyes. Bob Stevens baptized me because I had made that promise to him. As I came out of the water I saw my dad first. Excitement and joy seemed to be flowing out of him. For me it was an overwhelming experience. As I recall it, I can almost feel the water rushing around me.

I met my wife, Tara, my sophomore year, a few weeks before I was baptized. I remember inviting her to my baptism. She gave me a funny look. She had thought I was a returned missionary because of the guys I associated with. I wasn’t a freshman. So she thought, “What did Earl do to have to be rebaptized?” When I met her, she wasn’t fully comfortable in the ward where she was. Because I didn’t know that a person was to go to the ward where that person resided and because I just thought it was like church where I grew up—a person went where he or she wanted to—I said to her, “Come to church with me.” So she became acquainted with the Lundbergs and developed a good relationship with them.

I found myself always looking to Tara because I was a new member. In fact, anyone whom I knew to be a member I immediately began to watch to learn more and to see whether I was doing the right thing. I carefully watched her example. There’s a funny little story. I was coming back from church services one day and decided to visit her. She lived at the Glenwood Apartments. She was lying out tanning. I yelled through the fence, “What are you doing? It’s Sunday!” I was only joking. But as she and I talked later, she said, “You know, from that point on I never tanned again on Sunday.” We had a positive effect on each other.

Ours was a typical courtship. Tara doesn’t call it typical. She says we set a record at BYU for dating longest before we got engaged—just over a year. Tara kept giving me pamphlets of talks that the prophets had given that said, “Don’t wait for financial security. Don’t wait to finish your education.” But I came up with excuses of why we should wait and wait.

She knew our relationship was right almost immediately. I was still uncertain. Actually, I felt the promptings of the Spirit. But I wondered, “Is it my conscience? Is it the Spirit? Is it something else?” I wasn’t quite sure. I was still trying to get more experience with knowing what the Spirit was saying to me. One night Tara and I were sitting in the library studying. I was in a kidding mood and started to play with some paper. I rolled it up and made a little ring. Then I took a little piece of paper, crumpled it on top, and made it into the shape of a little diamond. Then I colored it. I got on my knees and said to her, “Will you marry me?” Her eyes lit up. Right there I had to make a decision, “Is this what I really want?” I realized that I wanted her. Acting on a clear impression, a few days later I went to Fred Meyer and asked a clerk, “Do you have a ninety-day return guarantee?” He said they did. So I said, “Give me one of those rings.” Then I picked up some flowers and put the jewelry box in the flowers so that it blended in. Needless to say, she was excited.

At first I really tried to do missionary work with my father. But it came to the point where I didn’t want to push him over an edge. I have learned to be satisfied with the tools I have given him. Now I share my life experiences with him. “I blessed my daughter today,” or “In church we did this today,” or “When we went to the temple today. . . .” He and my mother had a bad relationship after they divorced. They didn’t speak for years. Recently he walked up to her and said, “Let’s bury the hatchet.” He suddenly wants to make things better with people, to let go of anger. He has become a defender of my choices.

I think I would have been baptized into the Church at some point in my life. But I don’t think I would have been as receptive as I was at BYU. In high school I was probably introduced to the Church by my friends but just didn’t pay attention. At BYU, I was immediately receptive. I attribute my openness to the environment.

Friends have asked whether I wish I had gone to another school where an athlete could find more national recognition and have a better chance to become a professional football player. Friends have seen me struggle for years trying to play professionally. Whenever I went to a football camp outside of Utah, I found myself in a totally different environment. I had the distinct feeling, “I’m the only Latter-day Saint here.” Consequently, I tried to act the part of who

I was. Correspondingly, my athletic concentration dropped off because I was so focused on being a good example. When I was on the practice field, of course, I was trying hard. But my worrying about who I was and how I was acting actually influenced my performance. The situation may be different for others. But while I could say that I wish it were different, I'm glad it is this way.

Now I look back and think, "It may have been nice to play professionally, but I would not have what I have now." I have a wife to whom I've been sealed in the temple. I have three children—a fourth one is on the way—and a nice home in an area where I can be around the influence of BYU all the time. As I tell young people, I have certain tools and I can choose to use them or not. If I had gone to another school, I wouldn't have those tools. In my life, BYU itself made a huge difference. I'm glad it is this way. My life has changed tremendously, and all for the better. I could have had a lot of money, but money wouldn't have changed me into who I now am. As much lure as there is at a school with a bigger national reputation and enhanced chances of playing professional football, I know that had I not chosen BYU I would never have met my wife, I wouldn't have the children I have, and I wouldn't have the perspective on life I have. If I had to make the decision again where to play college ball, I would come to BYU.

During my playing days, it was almost a spiritual experience I being out there because I felt that sixty thousand people were saying, "You're doing great! We support you. You may miss a field goal, but we're going to invite you on Sunday to speak to our youth." I have spoken at a lot of firesides since I was baptized. The one thing that I tell the youth is that it doesn't matter how many touchdowns you score, or runs you score, or games you've won. When you go back to see your Heavenly Father, he's going to ask, "How many people did you help? How many lives did you save?" He doesn't care that I kicked a winning field goal. It's meaningless in the eternal scheme. I am grateful for my change in life. I have tingles all over my body when I think about it. My experiences at BYU brought a vision of life. My angle of looking at life changed. Football, of course, is what brought me to BYU. I now count my blessings. If I had not been able to kick a funny oblong ball, I would never have heard BYU knocking at my door, and I never would have replied. I would have been eternally shortchanged.