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OFFICE OF THE WHITE HOUSE PRESS SECRETARY

THE WHITE HOUSE

REMARKS OF THE PRESIDENT
AT THE
PROFESSIONAL ATHLETES PRAYER BRUNCH

THE EAST ROOM

11:45 A.M. EST

Please sit down, and let me say a few words.

I think many of you know that about once a month or thereabouts we have State dinners with the heads of various Governments around the world. Some of you have joined us on those occasions. When those events take place, the State Department and Betty preempt all the invitations, except I get a little leeway.

I can ask about two or three people that I feel comfortable with, and they are usually people who have competed in athletics. This is the first meeting in the White House where I have really controlled the situation. (Laughter)

I do feel happy and comfortable with all of you. You have done so beautifully in your area of excellence, in your profession, and it is nice to see you, and on behalf of both Betty and myself, we welcome you on this occasion to the White House.

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Before making my personal remarks on behalf of Betty and myself, if all of you would like, we would invite you to take a look at some of the more private rooms up on the next floor, the Lincoln Room and the Queen's Bedroom where we hope to have the Queen of England come and spend a day or two with us on the Fourth of July, which is a very appropriate date. (Laughter)

But, they tell me she is a great lady, and so she is coming to help us celebrate Independence Day. So, after we are through, the people from the Usher's Office will see to it, if you would like to go upstairs and see some of these great traditional, wonderful rooms that are in this house.

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It is a great honor and a very special privilege for Betty and myself to welcome you to this house. As I said earlier, I have always had a great envy for those of you who have really made it in your various fields of athletics.

As a young grade school, schoolyard, street corner athlete, my ambition -- really, lifetime ambition -- was to be somewhat proficient in one or more fields of athletic endeavor. Good or bad, I did not make it, and so I sort of get a secondary impact out of reading the sports' pages first every morning. (Laughter)

I do it for two reasons. One, I enjoy the opportunity of seeing how well or how badly people are doing, but compared to the front page, (Laughter) in the sports page you have a 50-50 chance of being right. (Laughter)

President Kennedy once said at a State dinner for Nobel prize winners, "There has never been such an extraordinary collection of talent and human knowledge at the White House before, with the possible exception when Thomas Jefferson dined alone."

I believe it is quite safe to say that no more outstanding representation of athletic prowess has ever been seen in this house before. As I said, Betty and I are most pleased and delighted to have you all here. Your athletic abilities, however, even though far excelling those of the average person or the average athlete, are not all that make you very, very special, and you have heard from some most articulate and dedicated and committed people this morning.

I think what they said and how they said it meant a great deal to all of us. You are also special because of your love of God, your faith in him, a love and a faith that Betty and I share. The Apostle Paul, writing the Corinthians, said, "They which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize."

Everyone in this room has run the race. You have received the prize that comes with excellence. You have tasted what Jim McKay calls "The thrill of victory and the agony of defeat."

Yet, you know that because of your faith you can never be defeated. There will be setbacks, there will be races or matches or games that you will not win, but you will never be defeated because the presence of God is too strong in each and every one of your lives.

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If God is on your side -- and he will be if you are on His -- no man, no woman, can ever defeat you. As the Bible said, "God be for us, who can be against us." As President and as one who has been in the political arena for 27 years, I have had my share of political victories, as the Minority Leader in the House of Representatives for almost ten years, in the House dominated by the opposition.

For most of the time I have known my full share of defeats along the way, but whenever I am discouraged or disappointed by the course of events, I know there is a place I can go for solace and for strength. That knowledge is a source of great comfort and consolation to me. It sustained me in many hours of trial and chastened me in the hour of triumph or in pride.

I sincerely, and most sincerely, believe that America is the greatest Nation today because we have, from the very first, declared our dependence on God and placed our trust in Him.

"In God We Trust" is much more than a national motto. It is the testament we followed from our earliest, earliest days in this country. The spirit of competition, so strong in America throughout our history, has been responsible for much, much of our material progress, just as it has been partially responsible for your outstanding performances in the many fields of athletic competition, but there is a higher spirit, a nobler spirit which pervades our national life, and makes the quality of our lives so much more important to us than the quantity of our possession or our individual honors.

That spirit, that infinite spirit of hope and compassion and love has lived through the ages. We are fortunate that it has dwelt so long and blessed so richly this land, and its many, many peoples. Our constant prayers must be that this spirit will find its way into our individual hearts, our minds, and, of course, our lives.

The discipline of athletics teaches us to deny ourselves those things which might hamper our performance on the field of challenge. But, that discipline tells us the rewards of our success will far outweigh the restrictions on our training.

So it is with the religious life for which the ultimate reward is nothing less than a place in the kingdom of God. Each of you in this room shares that ultimate goal with me. Each of you, famous, wealthy, and happy as you may be, know that things of this world are fleeting, that immortality is not something a sports writer can bestow upon you, that all earthly things shall pass away.

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For this reason, you have made a commitment that will last beyond this mortal life into the true realm of immortality. You made the great decision to live your lives in such a way that you would rejoice in the opportunities to serve your God to eternity.

You are prepared to lay all of your trophies at His feet. This is a worthy and wonderful goal for all of your lives.

Let us strive always to achieve it so that we may say with Paul, at the end of our lives, "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith."

Thank you very much.

END (AT 1:23 P.M. EST)