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Heisman provides Tebow broader audience for message of faith

By Mark Schlabach
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GAINESVILLE, Fla. -- Florida quarterback [Tim Tebow](#) took the microphone, scanned the 14 rows of grim-faced men sitting in folding metal chairs and recognized the familiar hue of blue.

"How many Gator fans do we have in the house today?" Tebow asked.

After more than half the men raised their hands, Tebow added, "All right, those who didn't raise their hands, that's who I'm preaching to today."

On a balmy Saturday morning in mid-April -- the Heisman Trophy-winning quarterback's first weekend away from the bright spotlight of Florida football -- Tebow had never seemed more comfortable.

His playing field was a concrete basketball court in the middle of Gainesville Correctional Institute, a minimum-medium security state prison where banished major league baseball stars Doc Gooden and Darryl Strawberry once served hard time. His sideline was a 15-foot metal fence topped by razor wire and guarded by a correctional officer carrying a shotgun and driving a small pickup truck. His audience no longer was tens of thousands of Gator fans cheering his every move, but rather more than 150 inmates, many of whom are serving at least three-year prison sentences for drug-related offenses and still trying to kick the habit that put them in there.

Still, Tebow seemed as confident as when he lowers his broad shoulders into SEC defenders. He delivered his message loud and clear, as if he were barking orders in the Gators' huddle.

"Everybody is telling me I've made it," Tebow told the inmates. "They tell me, 'Tim, you have success and you've made it.' I've won the Heisman Trophy, so I've got it made, right? One day, people are going to forget about me. One day, people are going to forget about the Heisman Trophy, the jump pass and the national championship. One day, this [championship] ring is going to rust. There are only four things that are going to last forever: God, his word, people and rewards.

"Because I'm so passionate about it, and because I learned that gift so early, I don't want to go to heaven and hear Jesus tell me, 'Tim, why didn't you tell someone else about it?' It's a choice each of you have to make. I can't make that choice for you. Your friend can't make that choice for you. It's up to you. No matter how bad your life has been, eternity can be great. It's not how you start, fellas, it's how you finish."

In the four months since Tebow became the first sophomore to win the Heisman Trophy, he has sought to spread his message of faith as far as possible. Winning college football's most coveted individual award has provided him with a broader audience.



Florida quarterback Tim Tebow delivered his message at two Florida prisons on April 19.

"Because of my name recognition and because of who I am, I've been given an opportunity to go places where most other people can't go," Tebow said. "I can go into prisons and speak, and no one will say anything. I can go into schools and speak, and they'll love to have me. I can go to all these different places because of who I am as a football player. That's a platform the Lord has given me, and I think it's my responsibility to take advantage of it."

It's a lesson Tebow learned from his parents long ago. His father, Bob Tebow, helped start a campus Christian organization while attending Florida in the 1960s. After working as a pastor, he founded the Bob Tebow Evangelistic Association, which established an orphanage in the Philippines, among other endeavors. Bob and Pam Tebow and their five children lived in the Philippines for some time during the 1980s and 1990s. Each of their children was home-schooled, including Tim, who later became a star quarterback at Nease High School in Jacksonville before attending Florida.

"I've seen a lot of needy people and needy places in different countries," Tebow said. "I've seen a lot of people in prisons who really need the gospel. I've seen people change. It's encouraging to me that the Lord is using me to change people's lives, and there's not many other people who are willing to go out there. They don't do it because they're either scared or they're satisfied just sitting at their house and not doing much to change the world."

Florida coach Urban Meyer said Tebow is convinced he can help change the world one person at a time.

"If anybody ever knew the complete story about Tim Tebow, most people wouldn't believe it," Meyer said. "Every time he does something like this, it's not the first time he's taken his personal time to do something for someone else. Nothing surprises me about Tim. There's a skeptical side to all of us. We think, 'They talk the talk, but do they really walk the walk?' I can't say I've met many people that do, but Tim is definitely one of them."

During Tebow's spring break in March, he traveled to his father's Filipino orphanage for five days. He spent time with orphans, spoke about his faith in schools and market places, and even assisted doctors during medical procedures. Tebow said he removed cysts from patients and performed a few circumcisions.

"It's pretty nerve-racking at first, but you get your hands under control and do the work," Tebow said. "It's pretty cool."

Tebow, 20, considers his work at home as rewarding. On April 19, he spent more than eight hours inside two of Florida's state prisons, standing shoulder to shoulder with violent and non-violent offenders. At Gainesville Correctional Institute, Tebow's right tackle no longer was protecting his blind side. Four correctional officers stood several yards away in a grass yard -- and they didn't even carry guns.



Moving from the gridiron to the gospel is no big leap for Heisman Trophy winner Tim Tebow.

"No matter where I am, if I'm preaching to Muslims or in a prison, if you're in the will of God, that's safer than driving down the interstate," Tebow said. "That's how I feel about it. He's in control of whatever happens. I'm thinking more about their needs than my needs. They need to hear what I'm sharing, so I don't think about any sense of fear. The Lord has it under control, and he'll take care of me."



According to warden Buddy Roberts, Tim Tebow's message will have an impact on the inmates because he is in their age group.

But Tebow might have used a few blockers at Lancaster Correctional Institute in Trenton. The second stop on his prison tour was like going from a road game at Vanderbilt to a Saturday night contest at LSU. The minimum-medium security facility houses 580 inmates, nearly all of whom are youthful offenders from ages 18 to 24. They've been imprisoned for offenses ranging from drug trafficking to attempted murder. Correctional officers at LCI call the young inmates "jitterbugs" because they have so much energy. Two weeks earlier, a fight broke out in the cafeteria and inmates swung mop and broom handles at each other. A few minutes after Tebow arrived, a fight broke out at a nearby basketball court during mandatory calisthenics and a guard was knocked to the ground. "You have a teenage son?" LCI warden Buddy Roberts asked. "Just imagine having 580 of them. I spent my entire career in adult facilities. This is worse."

Visitors are required to walk through two security gates and a metal detector at LCI. The inmates are divided into four populations, each designated by the color of a prisoner's hat. Inmates wearing orange hats are new arrivals, red hats are for those who have been there longer, blue hats are for those who are considered model inmates and yellow hats are for those with discipline problems.

LCI offers prisoners educational programs in auto mechanics, computer science, irrigation, carpentry and other fields. Inmates can earn GEDs while they are imprisoned there. The prison has teachers, doctors, psychologists, nurses and a dentist on staff. The 84-acre facility has nine cottage-style dorms and two dorms with open bays, which house about 150 inmates each. The prison has a softball field, several basketball courts and workout area, which has dip and pull-up bars but no actual weights.

A white chapel sits in the middle of the prison yard. Roberts said the chapel is home to different religious studies each night. LCI even has a faith-based dorm. But the prison isn't allowed to educate its prisoners about religion. That's where volunteers like Tebow are needed.

"His message gets through, especially with this age group," Roberts said. "I think the message he gives them will have an impact because it's coming from a kid of the same age group. They can relate to him better."

Jim Williams, who owns an electrical contracting company in Jacksonville, has spent more than four decades preaching inside Florida's prisons. Williams helped organize Tebow's trip. While Tebow was the main attraction, inmates also were entertained by Bunny Martin, a former team chaplain of the Dallas Cowboys and a world yo-yo champion. Bob Cole, a former con man and

professional gambler, who inspired Robert Redford's role in the movie "The Sting," also was part of the prison ministry.

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"Inmates won't go to the chapels," Williams said. "That's why we go to the recreation yards. That's the culture of prisons. They'll come see an athlete." And many will even listen to Tebow's message.

"If you say, 'Timmy, I want that gift of eternal life, I want to have that gift you have,' then I want you to come stand up here with me right now," Tebow told the inmates at Gainesville Correctional Institute.

Nearly 80 inmates at GCI and another 40 at LCI joined Tebow on the basketball court. He led them in prayer, then helped distribute prison-based Bibles and other literature to inmates. Tebow spent even longer signing autographs for the inmates, leaving his signature on a few Bibles.

"It's about having an opportunity to go in there and change people's lives and give inmates hope when there's little hope in their lives," Tebow said. "Even though they're very hard people, most of them are so far down in a hole that they're in need of something. They need something to hold onto and something to pull themselves out. When their lives might seem like nothing and they feel like they're never going to be able to do anything with their lives, when they hear this message and hear they can have eternal life in heaven, that gives them hope. That's something they can hold on to. That's something that really does get through to them."

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Tim Tebow signed a few autographs after delivering his message to the inmates.