With Spring Training Under Way, Two Baseball Veterans Share Their Faith with Fellowship of Christian Athletes

Mike Matheny: ‘We should play the game in a way that honors Him’
R.A. Dickey: ‘He’s using me to make a difference this side of eternity’

KANSAS CITY, Mo.—The groundhog may have predicted an early spring, but there’s one sure sign that winter is coming to an end. It’s not necessarily the melting of the snow or the peeking of green through the ground, but the reporting of pitchers and catchers to MLB Spring Training. Players headed to Florida and Arizona last week, and games will kick off in the Grapefruit League and Cactus League the first few days of March.

For baseball veterans Mike Matheny and R.A. Dickey, Spring Training is a new start for the sports season, but a new life in Jesus holds a much deeper meaning. Matheny and Dickey recently told their faith stories to the Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA, www.fca.org) and remain involved with the ministry.

“For more than six decades, FCA has focused on impacting coaches and athletes for Christ, often by telling the stories and working alongside professional athletes in all sports arenas,” said FCA President and CEO Les Steckel. “We’re honored to share the faith of Mike Matheny and R.A. Dickey. Their journeys may not have always been easy, but they put their faith in Christ during the tough times, too. Sports mirrors life in a way; sometimes there are big Ls in the loss columns, but when we trust Jesus first, the end result is always a win.”

Current St. Louis Cardinals manager and former longtime catcher Mike Matheny was known as “Mad Dog” in the league for his intense play. Eventually, despite his years of toughness, injury forced Matheny to retire from behind the plate, but he found his way back into baseball, as a catching instructor for Cardinals, an analyst for FOX Sports and, eventually, to the dugout with St. Louis. In 2011, Matheny became the youngest active manager in the majors at the age of 41. He didn’t have a day of major league coaching experience, but his leadership qualities were what the Cards liked.

The move paid off. In his rookie season as a manager in 2012, Matheny took St. Louis to within one game of the World Series. The next year, the Cards made it to the Fall Classic, losing to the Red Sox in six games. A contract extension means that Matheny will stay in St. Louis at least through 2017.

“The game didn’t come that easy to me, so I knew I had to outwork people,” Matheny told FCA for a 2014 feature in its magazine. “I was fortunate enough to be given people to help me. I took a lot of pride in that—the way to play the game and being a teammate, things that go beyond stats, the way you show up and serve people. I had a 13-year career when some people didn’t think I’d get one day in the big leagues. I’m proud of playing in a World Series.
I'm proud of winning four Gold Gloves. Those are things you work for, not something they hand out.”

Today, Matheny stays active with FCA, speaking at events and continuing to build up young athletes. Most recently, Matheny spoke to both players and parents at an FCA Champions Luncheon, where he said of FCA, “This has been a ministry that has been near and dear to me and made a difference in my life.”

“I always felt I had the responsibility to be an example of how Christians ought to compete,” Matheny told FCA. “I still have those conversations with Christian players. We’re held to a higher standard. We’re serving a God who knows our intents and purposes. We should play the game in a way that honors Him, and that should be with a fierce competitor’s heart.”

There are other ways Matheny and his wife, Kristin, continue to serve through baseball. In 2003, they started the Catch-22 Foundation to help disadvantaged children in the greater St. Louis area, and two years later, christened the Catch-22 Miracle Field, a disability-friendly baseball diamond in Chesterfield, Mo.

“We’re all missionaries,” he said. “I believe in the saying: ‘Preach the gospel at all times, and when necessary use words.’ If I’m doing that, opportunities to share will come to give a reason for the hope I have. I look forward to those conversations.”

Like Matheny, R.A. Dickey has been around the league for a long time. In fact, at 41, he’s the oldest player in the MLB, ready to start his fourth season as a knuckleballer with the Toronto Blue Jays.

Last season, Dickey talked with FCA Magazine about his unpredictable career and how his faith carried him throughout.

Dickey grew up poor and had a tough childhood in Nashville. But, in seventh grade, a friend named Bo Bartholomew invited Dickey to an FCA Huddle. Dickey soaked up the gospel message, gave his life to the Lord and marveled at the love inside the Bartholomew home. He also marveled at Bo’s blonde younger sister, Anne. Eventually, they married in 1997.

“I felt like (God) had a stronghold in my heart from then on,” Dickey told FCA. “Whether I always pursued that was something else, but He always pursued me.”

God continued to pursue him over the next several tough years. After time in the minors, and a few setbacks, Dickey made his big league debut in 2001 with Texas at the age of 26, but he struggled to break out. By 2007, his career—as well as his marriage and his life—was at a crossroads. He even considered suicide, but God pulled him from the abyss again and again.

After opening up to a pastor and a Christian therapist, Dickey began to heal. He also continued to work on his pitch and saw successful seasons with the Mets in 2010 and 2011. In 2012, Dickey pitched the finest season of his Major League career, winning the National League Cy Young Award. Seeing his worth, New York traded him to Toronto, where he has remained steady for
three seasons, hoping for another breakout as Spring Training begins.

“I feel loved, sure, and His grace is abundant in my life, but I also feel a responsibility,” Dickey told FCA. “He’s given me things to do. It makes me feel like a tool in a good sense of the word, like He’s using me to make a difference this side of eternity. I feel a real purpose in that. That’s just His way. It also helps me to believe in a God that big. I’m never hopeless.”