

KEEPING YOUR HEAD (AND HEART) IN THE GAME

Prepare for your mission mentally and emotionally.

BY ROBERT K WAGSTAFF

Before they ever step out onto the playing field on the day of a big game, athletes spend a lot of time preparing. They master fundamental skills through daily practice. Strength training and conditioning also play a crucial role.

But the most successful athletes are not always those who are the physically strongest or the most gifted or skilled. More often they are those who are mentally and emotionally prepared for the challenging situations that arise in any athletic contest. They know how to work through difficulties, keep focused in the face of distractions, and stay positive when adversity strikes.

With Heart and Mind

If you are a missionary-to-be, you know that serving a mission takes a lot of preparation, too—study and prayer, interviews with Church leaders, appointments with doctors and dentists, and shopping for a missionary wardrobe. You should also get

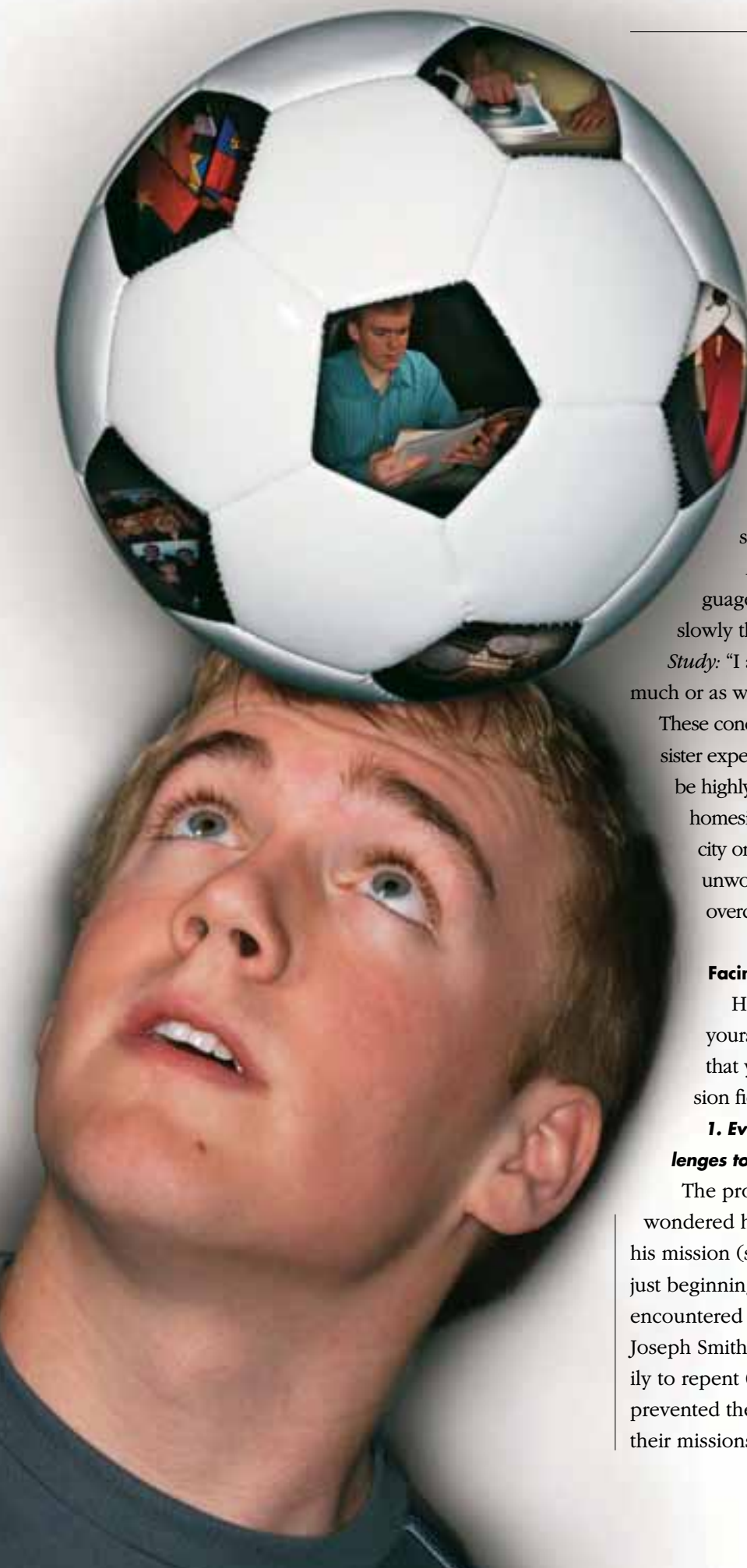
in physical shape for biking and walking, and brush up on how to cook a few simple, healthy meals, iron a shirt, sew on a button, and keep an apartment clean.

But serving a mission requires more than having a strong testimony, the right kind of clothing, and a few cans of SpaghettiO's. The Lord told Joseph Smith Senior, "Therefore, O ye that embark in the service of God, see that ye serve him with all your *heart*, might, *mind* and strength" (D&C 4:2; emphasis added). Like an athlete, you need to prepare both mentally and emotionally for the challenges you will encounter on a mission.

What are some of these challenges? While serving as president of the Philippines Missionary Training Center, I observed that most missionaries have concerns in the following areas:

Finances: "Will I have enough money?" "Will my family have enough money to support me and themselves?"

Family: "I am homesick." "I miss my family and friends." "I worry about problems in my family." "My nonmember parents are not that happy that I'm serving a mission."



Living situation: “Will I have difficulty living in a new environment?” “Will I get along with my companion?” “I’m not used to living on my own.”

Missionary life: “Wearing missionary clothing every day may be difficult for me.” “Will I be able to keep the missionary schedule?”

Language: “Will I be able to learn a new language well enough?” “I seem to be learning more slowly than others.”

Study: “I am having difficulty studying and reading as much or as well as I need to.”

These concerns are normal, and most every elder and sister experiences at least one of them. In fact, it would be highly unusual if a young person did not feel some homesickness or apprehension about living in a new city or country. Such concerns do not make you unworthy or disobedient, and you can successfully overcome them.

Facing Challenges

Here are a few ideas that can help you prepare yourself for these normal challenges and others that you may encounter as you go into the mission field to serve the Lord.

1. Even the prophets have had to overcome challenges to complete their missions.

The prophet Enoch felt so inadequate that he wondered how the Lord could have chosen him for his mission (see Moses 6:31). When he was a teenager just beginning his ministry, the Prophet Joseph Smith encountered bitter persecution from his neighbors (see Joseph Smith—History 1:22). Enos had to struggle mightily to repent (see Enos 1:2). Yet none of these challenges prevented these prophets from successfully completing their missions.

SEEK HELP IF NEEDED

Most concerns can be resolved when they are dealt with early. If needed, however, a doctor or professional counselor can help too. If you experience severe anxiety, obsessive thoughts, compulsive behaviors, or feelings of depression that interfere with your ability to function, your parents and priesthood leaders can help you get medical or professional help.



2. Adjusting to your mission will be a process. You will experience highs and lows.

Initially, you should expect some stress as you adjust to being in a new and challenging environment. As your mission continues, other difficulties will inevitably arise. If you do not understand this, you may become frustrated or discouraged when you and your mission do not measure up to some imagined ideal.

3. Sharing a concern with another—a companion, district leader, or mission president—can often help diminish your concerns.

Keeping them bottled up magnifies them.

When I was serving as president of the Philippines Quezon City Mission, one day Elder Jones* arrived at the mission home wearing a T-shirt, jeans, and tennis shoes and carrying his suitcases. “I want to go home, President,” he told me.

After listening to his concerns, I told him: “Leaving your mission is a reactive response, which will diminish the control you have over your life. And if you continue to be reactive, you will have problems dealing with difficulties you encounter after you return home.” I also advised him to talk with other missionaries about his concerns.

After further discussion Elder Jones changed into his missionary clothing and returned to his area. He talked with other missionaries, and he prayed for strength to overcome his challenges. The next time I met with him, he expressed gratitude that he had persisted through his difficulties.

4. “Forget yourself and go to work.”

You have probably heard this advice that President Gordon B. Hinckley’s father sent to his discouraged missionary son. Work is good medicine. Sometimes just going to work can help your own problems diminish.



One wise mission president advised his missionaries to do a small kindness for their companions each day. Focusing on others’ happiness also creates positive emotions.

Ammon and the sons of Mosiah, some of the great missionaries of the Book of Mormon, recorded: “Now when our hearts were depressed, and we were about to turn back, behold, the Lord comforted us, and said: Go amongst thy brethren, the Lamanites, and bear with patience thine afflictions, and I will give you success” (Alma 26:27). In other words, success would come only after they patiently persisted in doing the work they had been called to do.

5. The Lord is the wisest Counselor and the source of spiritual healing and strength.

By all appearances, Elder Clark* was an ideal missionary. He was obedient, baptized and confirmed many people, and was loved by his companions and Church members. During the last few months of his mission he served as my assistant in the mission office. So when I saw him following his mission I was surprised when he confided that he had had a very difficult time at the beginning of his mission. He was homesick, frustrated with learning the language, and having difficulty with the missionary schedule and rules. However, he knew he had been called by the Lord to serve his mission and that the Lord would support him. So he knelt to talk to the Lord, sharing his concerns and pleading for His help in overcoming them. “As I did this,” Elder Clark told me, “I felt a real change in my being. I felt the Lord’s support and strength. Ideas and good feelings

came to me, and I began to overcome my negative concerns. With God's help, I became a successful missionary."

Taking the Field

After a great athletic contest, we never hear athletes say anything like the following: "The whole game was easy and pleasant. I performed perfectly, and I encountered no challenges." Great games are hard-fought tests of character and resolve. We revere successful athletes for their strength in overcoming significant challenges.

Likewise, all missionaries face situations that test their ability to persevere and to put their faith in the Lord. But no missionary goes into the field alone. As the Lord promised

missionaries who served early in this dispensation: "I will go before your face. I will be on your right hand and on your left, and my Spirit shall be in your hearts, and mine angels round about you, to bear you up" (D&C 84:88). As the Lord's servant, you can be assured that He is not only aware of you but that He will be with you as you meet the great challenges and experience the great blessings that await you on your mission. **NE**

* Names have been changed.

