

Coming Back Stronger
By Trent Forrest and Tom Hager
Athletes for God

On the night Hurricane Michael hit, my teammates and I knew that we were facing a pretty powerful storm.

We were hunkered down at the basketball facility, but even when we opened the door to look outside, we could tell it was a pretty ferocious hurricane. Even though we were almost 28 miles from the coast and away from the most devastating part of the storm's path, we could see the damage here in Tallahassee.

A few times we went outside and we saw the wind had knocked over trees. Even when we went indoors, we could still feel the storm's power. We were playing video games and playing football to try and keep things light, only to have our power go out. But losing power is nothing compared to what some of the people in our state have gone through.

At least 18 Americans have lost their lives, and many more have lost their homes. The hurricane had a personal effect on me, because I grew up in Chipley, which was right near the path of the hurricane. Fortunately, Hurricane Michael had lost much of its power by the time it hit Chipley, but I knew people in Panama City Beach that had their homes destroyed.

I can only imagine how devastating that feeling must be, watching a storm wipe away what you've worked so hard for, but on some level I'll never know what that feeling is like. What I do know is that God was there as the hurricane hit, and He will still be there as we try and rebuild our state.

I also know that God gave our basketball team the talent and opportunity to give people hope.

Maybe it'll just be a distraction from everything for a few hours each week. Or maybe it will be just something positive they can look forward to, during the week. But I know that our team is going to do everything we can to help these people out.

One of my favorite Bible verses is Luke 12:48, which says "To whom much has been given, much will be required." God gave us all these talents to excel on the court, and we want to use it for the right purposes. I think this year its never been more obvious that our performance on the court can shine a light in people's lives.

It's never fun to see people go through tragedy like this, but I do know that great things can come from bad situations. All I have to do is look back at what happened last year.

As my sophomore season approached, I had the feeling it was going to be special.

I was coming off a solid freshman campaign, where I was the sixth man on our team, so I had been the first one off the bench. Now that I had a year of experience under my belt, I had a chance to be in the starting lineup.

Then just as our preseason practices were getting underway, I hyperextended my right knee. I missed most of the rest of the fall practices and even the season opener, and when I finally did return, I wasn't in the starting lineup. I was going to be the sixth man for the second straight season.

When I was coming off the bench the first season, it was already a big transition, being a two-time state champion in high school. At the same time, I knew I was a freshman and it was what the coaches wanted. It has always been my nature to do anything that will help the team win. If that meant me coming off of

the bench as a sophomore, that's exactly what I was going to do.

From a young age my parents instilled in me that being a team player means everything, and that God puts you in position to be successful; He wouldn't put me into a situation He didn't think I could handle. I was going to support my teammates because they support everything I do. They were the ones who were constantly checking in and seeing how I was doing when I was out. They wanted to see me come back just as much as I did.

With me coming off the bench, our team made it to the NCAA Tournament as a No. 9 seed, and then beat Missouri in our opener. That gave us a second round matchup against Xavier, the No. 1 seed in our region. They were 29-5 going into that game, and built a 58-46 lead midway through the second half, but I knew by this point that a little setback doesn't mean that you give up.

We slowly began to chip away at the lead, and I remember at one point during one of our timeouts, me and my teammate Mfioundu Kabengele looked at each other like let's go win.

Terance Man, a junior on our team at the time, hit a tough runner to cut the deficit to 66-59 with 5:28 to play, and moments later I was able to find a lane to pull us within 66-61. Then an errant pass found its way into my hands, and after another layup and foul, suddenly we were within 66-64.

But just like we weren't going to go down without a fight, neither was Xavier. The Musketeers still led 70-68 with a little over a minute to go and they had the ball when my teammate PJ Savoy helped strip the ball. The ball landed right in my hands, and I immediately broke towards the other end. I had PJ on my right and Terance on my left, so I knew I had a good option either way. The thing was, PJ is an awesome 3-point shooter, and a basket here would give us the lead. I threw it over to P.J. and he buried it to put us up. A few moments later, we were dancing our way into the Sweet 16.

Being the underdog, and proving everybody wrong, was an incredible feeling. We then upset Gonzaga to advance all the way to the Elite Eight, and we could see on our social media that the students and fans in Tallahassee were loving every minute of it.

We're hoping this season we can go at least one step further.

If someone were to ask me why God let this hurricane hit our state, I wouldn't necessarily have an answer. I don't know why this happened. But I think my job isn't to understand God's plan, it's just to try and do the best I can with the path He gave us.

When we spent that night at our basketball facility, one thing I made sure to do was call my mom. Not only does my mom live in Chipley, she is also a pastor at a church she helped start. I am happy to report that both my mom's home and the church are okay.

My mom is a great example of just listening to what God is asking of you. My mom didn't start out as a minister, but she took me to church when I was younger and she helped teach scripture as a youth pastor. As I grew in my faith, so did she, and when I was in high school she decided to become a pastor full time. It was a pretty late time to make a career change like that, but my mom did what the Lord had compelled her to do. I try do to the same. I don't necessarily mean that God is leading me into ministry, but I just plan on following wherever He leads me.

My mom attends all my home games to this day, and even makes it out to some of the road games when she can. I always look for her when I take the floor, and she helps keep my mind right before tipoff. Both of my parents always told me to pray the right way and just put everything in God's hands.

But even though my parents laid a great foundation for me, and visit me here pretty regularly, I have to

make decisions for myself now. My faith has grown more now than it has before, and it couldn't have come at a better time.

People are curious if things are getting back to normal for the people down here, and for many folks affected by the hurricane, the answer is not at all. Things might not be normal for a long time. But if that comeback against Xavier showed anything, all you have to do is just chip away. One day at a time, one prayer at a time, put God first and everything else will follow.