



Jeff Chaves

February 9, 2023

Lion Hearted



Credit: Jakub Pláteník

[f Share on Facebook](#)

[Share on Twitter](#)

The players are assembled on green grass that's marked in 10-yard increments. The whistle sounds and there's the crash of helmets under the stadium lights. It's a scene that would be at home in the Super Bowl.

But this scene isn't set in America. It's in Prague, Czech Republic, and the team is the Prague Lions of the recently expanded European League of Football (ELF). Once a uniquely North American sport, American football now has a rapidly growing European fan base.

"American football is blowing up in Europe. In particular, in Germany, the numbers are crazy to see," says Zach Harrod, coach and part-owner of the Lions. "The NFL is taking interest in doing more and more [in Europe]."

Harrod isn't in Europe just for the sport, though. In addition to coaching football, he's a church planter. He describes himself as "just a guy who loves Jesus. A guy that God's called to Central Europe to do ordinary things, and let God do extraordinary things through it." We caught up with Harrod while he was in the U.S.—both recruiting players and gathering support for his ministry—to learn how he balances football and overseas ministry.

A Heart for the Nations

Harrod grew up in Southeast Wisconsin and, like so many kids in the Midwest, he was drawn to football. His father was a coach, and like many families in his community they were in church on Sundays when it was convenient. "Faith wasn't anything that was really serious to me," he says. After rehabbing from an unfortunate accident in high school he was able to get back on the field, and lettered in football at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh.

"One day a guy from Cru knocked on my door," Harrod says. "I told him he should talk to my roommate who had a Buddhist statue, because he clearly needed it. I attended church and was confirmed and all that." He invited Harrod to a Bible Study, which he repeatedly dodged. After Harrod's roommate left, the ambitious Cru member just invaded. "Now I had a single room and he's like, 'Well, Zach, hey, you have a single. So we could do a Bible study in here.'" The rest, as they say, is history. Harrod's faith went from being his family's to his own.

During his time at UWO Harrod connected with the local Athletes in Action group and developed a heart for the nations. He decided that he needed to go overseas at least for a time. "I went over to Prague for what I thought would be two years. I was thinking maybe about coming back and joining one of my buddies who was planting a church," he says. "Well, a year into this stay in the Czech Republic, and I saw people making the decision [for Christ] which doesn't happen often." Seeing lives change and young people transformed from atheists to Christ followers convinced him that missions was for him. He came home to finish his degree, and then returned to the Czech Republic on a permanent basis. He has spent 18 of the past 20 years in Prague. He married Míša, a Czech native, and they have two Czech-American boys. Míša's heart is passionate about helping people who are trapped in situations of injustice. The family is part of a house church and ministry is definitely a family affair.

Growing Pains

As Harrod served with Athletes in Action Harrod became aware of the football culture that was budding in Europe, and got connected to the Prague Lions, where he played and coached several positions with the junior team. What started as a position with the junior team led him on a bumpy road to the top of the growing franchise.

“We went through a really nasty team split in 2009–10, and I decided to stay with the Lions,” Harrod says. “I ended up hanging up my cleats though because I didn’t want to coach and play and do both those things in a mediocre way.” He became the offensive coordinator for the senior team, and then in 2018, he became head coach. Harrod and other investors later purchased the logo and the franchise.

As Harrod has taken over the Lions, there have been plenty of ups and downs. The team lost some sponsors during the COVID-19 shutdown, and Russia’s invasion of Ukraine posed further challenges.

“I had to deal with several Ukrainian players that have family there, and there are several Czech players who are married to Ukrainians who had family there as well,” he says.

Through it all the Lions managed to win two of three championships this past summer, but fell short by four points of the European Football League Cup. This garnered the attention of the ELF, a new league with bigger sponsors. They’ve added the Prague Lions for the 2023 season.

A ‘Missional Insider’

Harrod considers football an avenue to effective ministry. “I look at it as like I’m kind of a hybrid. I am fully a missionary who has a full-time job in football, but that full-time job won’t pay my bills yet,” he says. “That full-time job allows me to be with people on a day-to-day basis. It helps me to be present in people’s lives.”

Because he is a football coach, he has a chance to see doors opened in unexpected ways. “I met ambassadors because of football. I’ve met Czech celebrities, and have relationships with them because of American football. That wouldn’t have happened if I went over and tried to do a Bible study.” On his website he describes himself as a “missional insider” in the American football scene in Europe.

From a missions standpoint, the Czech Republic is considered very difficult territory. The culture is post-Christian with less than one third of 1% identifying as evangelical Christians. Harrod reports that people are skeptical, and it takes a long time to see someone come to Christ. That’s why his

approach is actually ideal for this environment.

“It’s by thinking outside the box and creating third spaces where people will actually have conversation,” Harrod says. “People ask me, why don’t you have a church building? Because most of the people that we interact with will never go into a traditional church building. But they’re going to a café, they’re going into homes and then it can happen.”

As someone who regularly travels back and forth to the U.S. for 20 years, Harrod sees American culture going more and more in the direction of Europe in terms of faith. He thinks adopting the mindset of a missionary is the future for Christianity in the West.

He says, “At some point we as Christians got stuck thinking God is in this box, and this is how he functions. He is so much bigger. And I’m so glad that I’ve been put in this situation where I’m going to live amongst people and allow God to transform me, and allow God to transform them. Maybe even in the process God is going to use them in ways to transform me, which helps in their transformation too.”

Learn more about Zach Harrod at ZachHarrod.com.

 Share on Facebook

 Share on Twitter