



## INTRODUCTION

**A** weary US soldier skittishly standing watch in the midnight hours at a security checkpoint in the Middle East; a frightened young woman being rushed through the doors of the hospital delivery room; a seventy-five-year-old widow diagnosed with brain cancer and struggling to take a step; a businessman on the brink of bankruptcy; a freckle-faced teen dreading a mid-morning math exam and basketball tryouts after school—what could they possibly have in common?

Visible on each is the silver glint of a small and thin, inscribed, oblong drop—a dog tag necklace—a Shield of Strength. Invisible on each is the point of turning from fear to faith, from

gut-led to guided by the God of grace, from merely surviving to living a life of victory.

After water ski jumper Kenny Vaughan discovered that his biggest challenge in ski competition was conquering his fear, not in jumping farther than his competition, he bought some dog tag necklaces and had them engraved with the Scriptures, which had helped him wage his faith over fear.

The shields were his way to remember the moment he made a critical choice to live in faith and not fear, a decision he made while skimming across the water at top speed, approaching the ski ramp, making the deciding jump for the national championship. That decision changed his course from a heartbreaking pattern of difficult defeats to a promising future. When there was no way to win, he found victory in gaining a deeper faith in God and greater insight as to how God can turn hopeless trials into timeless trophies that brighten our lives and the lives of others.

He began sending the dog tag necklaces to friends and associates as tokens of courage,

faith, and focus in the face of challenge. He would pull his necklace off and give it to anyone who asked about getting one like it. Soon, requests for the necklaces began pouring in from everywhere.

When several Christian bookstore chains started stocking the necklaces, the tags quickly caught on with members of every generation.

Soon, military chaplains began requesting the necklaces for the troops under their charge. By the summer of 2003, more than 100,000 Shields of Strength had been sent to soldiers serving in military bases in the United States and overseas. Another 500,000 were being worn by civilians across the country. Now, requests for more of the necklaces come in every day from all over the world. Entire battalions serving in the Middle East and in Afghanistan are wearing the shields.

Lives across the country are being saved and changed through the Scriptures and salvation prayer inscribed on the tags.

*Trials to Trophies* is a story about Shields of Strength and a battle between fear and faith. In this true life adventure with God, world-class skier Kenny Vaughan—founder of Athletes for Christ—shares truths he learned about life’s challenges and the stubborn faith that turned his trial into a trophy.



## PROLOGUE

Everything in my life is marked as before or after that moment in 1996. It was the USA Water Ski National Championship competition in Fort Walton Beach, Florida. I was skimming across the water; my speed behind the boat was approaching sixty miles an hour. The long distance jump would take me approximately three stories high in the sky for a distance of about three quarters of the length of a football field.

For seventeen years, I had been working toward this day with rigorous physical training and discipline, and by pushing and perfecting my skills. I would never be more ready physically.

That day I learned that one cannot win a spiritual battle with only physical training. And I learned that faith in God is not something you can halfway, almost, or sometimes have. He will bring you to a day when you either have faith in Him or you don't. He will challenge you out of cautious faith to absolute faith. That's what He did to me.

At nationals that year, sixty of the country's best skiers were competing for the title. The skier before me had jumped five feet further than my personal best. My mind was waterlogged with worry and the boat pulling me seemed weighed down with my doubt. On my second of three jumps, I had hung my right ski on the side of the ramp, snapping off the rudder and tearing the ski boot that held my foot to the ski. Between my second and last jump, I had time to change the rudder, but no time to fix the boot.

The judges called time for me, and I knew I must ski then or forfeit. There was really no way for me to win with a torn ski boot, but the

boat accelerated and I was up. The water was smooth, but the choppy waves of my emotions swirled around me, threatening to throw me off balance. My inner turmoil swelled, fed by years of almost winning, years of getting close but never quite making the mark of a champion, of living the trial but never going home with the trophy. Moments in time of believing in the power of God, but never fully testing that faith, had led to years of grabbing on to the ski rope more tightly than I held on to God. Before that time, my fear had always propelled me toward failure at a greater speed than any boat could have pulled me.

Heading for the ramp, the wake of emotion broke with enough force to suck me under. I knew I was nearing the ramp with a speed too slow and a position too narrow on the boat. I could feel a part of me watching from the dock, then turning slowly and slinking away in defeat. All I could possibly do was lose, again . . .

I caught a glimpse of the words my girlfriend had painted on the handle of my tow rope, a

Scripture from Philippians 4:13: “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” I decided that this time I wouldn’t let my fear finish for me. I would finish to the glory of God and let Him take me all the way to victory or defeat. This time I would live out my faith to my last ounce of strength and concentration.

In retrospect, I see how God brought me to that moment. Every day since that moment, He shows me more about why He took me through the trials the way He did. Every day, I find more meaning in my wild ride up the ramp, holding so tightly to His hand.

But perhaps I should go back and start at the beginning . . . on that hot June day, so many trials ago, when my parents decided to teach us—my brother and sister and me—to water-ski.



PART ONE

# LEARNING THE ROPES



## CHAPTER ONE

# PRODIGAL STUDENT

“Call to Me, and I will answer you, and show you great and mighty things, which you do not know.”

*Jeremiah 33:3*

“Many are the plans in a man’s heart, but it is the Lord’s purpose that prevails.”

*Proverbs: 19:21*

I grew up around the water, fishing and boating.

I was ten when my uncle invited my family to his lake house for the 4th of July holiday weekend.

My parents decided to teach us—my brother and sister and me—to ski before the holiday.

My first ski equipment may have been crude, but the rough rope and broken broomstick we used as a ski tow handle must have tied a rope around my heart and bound me with a love for the sport that has never grown slack. The boat, a fourteen-foot flat bottom boat with a fifteen-horsepower Evinrude motor, pulled us on a sheet of plywood my dad had cut into a three-foot circle.

The plywood was easy to “ski” on, and my sister, brother, and I could all ride on it at the same time. My mother and father spent hours pulling us behind the boat, up and down the river on the plywood disk.

The week before we left for my uncle’s lake house, my parents bought us a \$35 pair of water skis. Those water skis turned the good time I was having into a comedy of errors for me. I had trouble getting up on the real skis, and when I did manage to pull myself up on them, I had no control and fell. It only took a couple of tries before I was waterlogged and disenchanted with the whole idea. I went back to fishing.

But before long, I heard the hum of the boat nearby and looked up to see my sister skiing down the river. I dropped my rod and ran to the water's edge, waving frantically and yelling at my dad to bring the boat back for me so I could try again.

Since I did not want to let my younger sister accomplish something that I couldn't do, my motivation to ski was stronger the second time around. I willed myself to stay up and gain control, and before long I found my ski legs, preserved my pride, and was gliding down the river behind the Evinrude.

I could never imagine all that was to follow this little sibling rivalry and my small taste of victory.