



# The Hunter's HOPE

**NFL legend Jim Kelly is establishing a post-gridiron legacy for Christ through his passions for parenting and nature.**

BY CLAY MEYER

**V**ery few people know what it's like to play in the NFL. Even fewer know what it's like to play in a Super Bowl. Only one knows what it is like to be the starting quarterback in four consecutive.

His name is Jim Kelly, and he is a football legend. From 1986 to 1996, as the quarterback of the Buffalo Bills, Kelly led his team to four consecutive Super Bowls, was selected to five Pro Bowls and passed for more than 35,000 career yards. Years before he was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 2002, his poster graced the bedroom walls of kids nationwide, and his football cards were placed carefully into thousands of collectors' albums.

Now, at the age of 50, Kelly knows that, while his fame might lie in football, his legacy will be about so much more. To him, it's not about the Hall of Fame or the historical statistics; it's about conveying the love of Jesus Christ to the world, specifically through two things very near to his heart: nature and parenting.

After experiencing the loss of a child, Kelly, along with his wife, Jill, has dedicated himself to making a Kingdom impact through their Hunter's Hope Foundation, which is named after their late son. In addition to the foundation, Kelly is also using his passion for hunting and fishing to share the truth of Christ through the FCA Outdoors ministry.

Yes, Kelly knows that things like the Hall of Fame enshrinement are special ways of recognizing his decade in the NFL. But when it comes down to it, Kelly knows that no earthly trophy could be greater than that which awaits him in eternity: the lasting rewards in the Kingdom of Heaven.

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Born and raised in East Brady, Pa., Kelly was a highly decorated quarterback at East Brady High. He considered attending nearby Penn State University, but, after being told he would have to move to linebacker, Kelly opted to attend the University of Miami. From 1979 to 1982, he thrived as the Hurricanes' quarterback and helped build the program into a national power.

Following his years at Miami, which included overcoming a career-threatening shoulder injury, Kelly was drafted 14th overall by the Buffalo Bills in the 1983 draft. But, after evaluating his prospects, Kelly opted instead to play in the United States Football League (USFL). In 1984, he earned league Rookie of the Year and MVP honors

as a member of the Houston Gamblers. When the USFL folded a year later, he rejoined the Bills and immediately became their starting quarterback.

While he wasn't aware of it at the time, Kelly now looks back and sees how, through each season, God was working out the details of his life.

"There are a lot of 'God things' in all of my life experiences," Kelly said. "I know that I have been tested all my life and have been very, very blessed. Even though I wondered why things happened certain ways, there was always a reason behind them, and that was God."

Another "God detail" that fell into place for Kelly took place in 1991 when he met his future wife at a post-Super Bowl party. According to Jill, while she was impressed by Kelly's status as an NFL quarterback, she refused to throw herself at him.

"When he initially asked for my number, I didn't give it to him," Jill recalled. "But later, he found out where I worked and pursued me, so I knew he was genuinely interested."

It was also during this time that Kelly and the Bills were making their historic run to four consecutive Super Bowls. From 1991 through 1994, the Bills reached the NFL championship game every season but came up just short of victory in each.

"I still don't know the reason why we had to lose four Super Bowls," Kelly said. "But I know it taught me that it takes a total team effort and involves everyone pressing along to achieve goals."

Following the last of the Bills' four Super Bowls, Jill gave birth to their first daughter, Erin, and they married the following year in 1996. As Jill shared, "We were both not living for the Lord at the time. But, since becoming Christians, we know that God has restored our lives in all areas."

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On Valentine's Day 1997, the Kellys celebrated Jim's 37th birthday with the birth of their second child, a son named Hunter. Within four months Hunter was diagnosed with Krabbe Leukodystrophy, a fatal nervous system disease, and was initially given 14 months to live. It was a blow to the entire Kelly family.

"I was so filled with fear," Jill said. "Even though I didn't know God personally, He was where I turned in desperation. God also put Christians in our lives who spoke truth to us from His Word."

While Jill found solace in God's presence, Kelly wrestled to accept