

God and Sport

In art there is a tendency to worship the artifact, as we see in accounts of idol worship in the Bible. In politics we see people worship Pharaoh or Caesar or whoever presents as the modern messiah. In music the artist can be called a pop “idol” and fans worship the performer. Sport can take on a religious hold too, and become a substitute faith and diversion. A club or excellent athlete can be venerated to a level which is spiritually unsound. The presence of sports club logos in newspaper death notices and club memorabilia at memorial services for the deceased shows how individuals gain meaning and significance from their sports “tribe”.

God is a player

Does God play? Did God put in us the propensity to play? Innocent children play and lose themselves in games. Jesus commended the children to us for their childlike faith. God is the creator of all things, His creative acts include sport. He made us with the urge to play, create games with strategies and rules and targets. God has made some of us with excellent and striking sporting gifts. It is for those blessed with these gifts to bring glory to Him. Artists use their gifts with proficiency, as do musicians, writers and surgeons. People in sport, and sports professionals who are Christians, do likewise.

Standards

We are to enter sport with the standards of Christ. This means we play hard, with love and integrity. We are honest and serve our team’s interests above our own. We treat the opposition with respect during the game as well as in off the court/field encounters. God made us to enjoy relationships, and special relationships are forged in sports games and also in the sports club worlds.

Paul in his epistles drew upon the sports of the ancient world for the purpose of spiritual analogy. If he was against sport, he would not have made such references. These references alone are not seen as being a justification for the playing sport. See 1 Cor 9:24-27, Gal 2:2 and 5:7, Phil 2:16, 3:13, 14 and 1Tim 4:8, 2 Tim 2:5, 4:7 and Heb 12:1, 2

The movie *Chariots of Fire* has the protagonist, Eric Liddell, who say, “God made me for a purpose, but he also made me fast and when I run I feel his pleasure”. After his Olympic win Liddell gave up most of his sport for missions as did C. T Studd his brilliant cricket career. But the two are not exclusive. There are many great athletes who live lives of faith out of a sporting career.





Competition is a basic and essential ingredient of sport. One needs to play to beat the competitor or competing team to gain pleasure in the game. And even when playing alone, one strives to beat prior attainment levels. Competition enhances the emotional intensity of the game. We “love” our competitor by playing hard; this provides both them and us with a maximum experience.

God gave us sport:

- a) to help grow relationships
- b) to keep fit in an enjoyable way
- c) for refreshment from work
- d) for psychological release and gratification
- e) to provide a popular arena for evangelism.
- f) for wholesome pleasure
- g) as a means of shaping character and self-discipline.

Handicapped people can find wonderful joy and release in sports activities and competition. The Paralympics began Rome in 1960. Today, the Paralympics are elite sport events for athletes with a disability. They emphasize, however, the participants' athletic achievements rather than their disability. Very old people can touch some of the pleasure of childhood again in sporting games appropriate to their fitness level. It is a heresy of old that the body is evil and the spirit good, Jesus occupied a body, and our bodies will be resurrected. The very physical nature of sport is not grounds for downgrading its worth. Perhaps we will continue to play sporting games in heaven. The treasures of the nations will go into the New Jerusalem; will not wholesome and engaging sporting pursuits be among these? Rev 21:24-26.



The world perverts sport as it does other gifts from God, like music and sex. Our task is to keep sport in its rightful place, which is not the centre of living, a place sacred to God. Winning a competition can become an unhealthy obsession, by making a game and or a team or particular player exalted; we make it an absolute and idol. This robs us of much of the pleasure - for such gods will certainly fail us. Idolatry brings death in its wake. It ruins sport and takes away the intended pleasure. When we play sport well, and keep the games to their right proportion and realm in our living, we allow the gift of sporting pursuits to conform correctly to God's created design. We model to unbelievers how to maximize joy from the gift without becoming possessed by it and the spirit of this age, which sits behind it in a predatory way. God gave us sport as a gift and fashioned our minds and hearts to create and enjoy games. It is no substitute for church or a life lived out bearing the fruit of the Spirit. But it is an enterprise which can facilitate healthy Christian living.

Team chaplains

Many of the major professional sports teams have access to chaplains. They are important forces for maintaining balance and integrity in the teams. So let's run the race of life before us with vigor as the author of Hebrews wrote 2000 years ago. The advice is still sound today. Let's seek victory in the glorious contest against sin and the spirit of this age, let's be counter cultural and put sport in its God appointed place. Heb 12:1

References:

Goheen M *Delighting in God's Good Gift of Sports and Competition*. In Edlin R and Ireland J Engaging The Culture National Institute For Christian Education Blacktown Australia 2006

<http://www.fcagear.com/>

Fellowship of Christian Athletes

<http://www.aiagear.com/>

Athletes In Action

<http://www.veritesport.org/>

Excellent site with articles and sport devotions for Christians

<http://uksportsministries.org/>

www.beaconmedia.com.au

Links to sports clubs and events with a faith orientation

<http://www.christiansinsport.org.uk/>

Includes information on sport for the handicapped

<http://www.christiansinfootball.org/>

Football

<http://www.ecsuonline.net/>

European sports links for Christians

<http://moldova.typepad.com/>

Sport and chaplaincy

<http://www.servingthepeopleofsport.net/>

For chaplains

<http://www.sportschaplaincy.com.au/>

Australian chaplains in sport

<http://www.jesusracing.com.au/>

Car racing for Christians

<http://www.givengain.com/>

Sport for Christ South Africa

<http://www.atletasdecristo.org/>

Brazil sports and faith

<http://www.fca.org/>

Fellowship of Christian Athletes USA

www.churchsports.org

<http://sportsspectrum.com/>

American athletes who are believers

<http://www.sportsfaithinternational.org/>

Great Christian sports men and women, Catholic in orientation

<http://www.sportsforceinternational.org/faith-and-sport>



www.beaconmedia.com.au

Activities

1. Read the Bible verses about sport written by Paul, (see paragraph 4). Choose three verses and explain why these are important to you.
2. Read the following excerpts of this article from the Wall Street Times in the USA. Why the reporter S Bailey saying faith is often not reported when it's an integral part of an elite athlete's life?

Where God Talk Gets Sidelined

Sports journalists are reluctant to tackle faith on the field.

FEBRUARY 4, 2010

By Sarah Pulliam Bailey

Tim Tebow may steal the Super Bowl spotlight by appearing in an antiabortion TV commercial with his mother, Pam, on Sunday night, but his faith is kept on the sidelines. Most reporters writing about the ad neglected to say that his mother's faith was the reason she did not abort him when doctors warned he could be born severely disabled in 1987. Perhaps the sportswriters assumed that most people know about the family's Christian beliefs. The former quarterback for the Florida Gators paints Bible verses under his eyes and is vocal about saving himself for marriage. Or perhaps writers, for a variety of reasons, are just uncomfortable exploring religion's impact on an athlete. Faith is the belief in things unseen. Sportswriters are trained to write about the observable. "One of the problems that we have is determining the veracity of a person's claim that he has just won this game for his Lord and Savior Jesus Christ," Mr. King said.

But "if that's something the player cites as a motivating factor, I don't think you're telling the full story if you don't explore that angle a little bit."

Reporters might also be apprehensive about giving an athlete a platform to espouse his beliefs. "When athletes give their testimonies in interviews, there's impatience, sometimes an outright hostility to religion, because they feel like an athlete is pushing religion on people," says Shirl James Hoffman, author of "Good Game: Christianity and the Culture of Sports." "Sportswriters who write on Christian athletes might be generally sympathetic to the moral life that they present off the field. When an athlete says anything that hits on their faith as the only way to salvation, now you're in real trouble."

More recently, reporters have found it hard to ignore Jesus-professing athletes like the quarterback Kurt Warner, who retired on Jan. 29. Mr. Warner, who went from stocking shelves at a grocery store to winning two MVPs, is outspoken about his faith. When a reporter attempts to separate the high-caliber athletes from average ones, they begin to

look for some intangible qualities, and faith is sometimes a part of that. "There is dishonesty in telling his story if you ignore what drives him, especially if you accept its role in one of the NFL's great success stories," the Arizona Republic's Paola Boivin wrote before last year's Super Bowl.

Sports journalism often lends itself to lengthy profile-driven features. Sportswriters have some of the best opportunities to tell human-interest stories, and in some cases that means connecting the religious dots for people. But when you look closer into what it means to be religious, it usually involves divisive opinions on matters like heaven and hell, and, in some cases, abortion.

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704022804575041131978769078.html> reference for the complete article



3. Comment on the following video of the Founder of Domino's Pizza and owner of sports teams being interviewed by a member of the clergy:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WJO6lb6l2n0>

4. Read and write your response to the following sequence of quotes from *US Today* national magazine, 6.12.2011.

"We've had athletes being very vocal about their faith and using their status as athletes to promote their faith for a long time now," said Tom Krattenmaker, author of *Onward Christian Athletes: Turning Ballparks into Pulpits and Players into Preachers*.

"This dates back to World War 2 when you saw organizations that were all about using the popularity of big-time spectator sports as a platform for promoting the faith. The *Fellowship of Christian Athletes* goes back to the '50s. But Tebow seems to have taken it to an extra level of intensity."

Tebow doesn't have a monopoly on sharing his faith through the spotlight sports brings. Free agent first baseman Albert Pujols points skyward with both index fingers when he crosses home plate. All-Star Oklahoma City forward Kevin Durant has been spotted reading the Bible at his locker before games. Florida Panthers 2011 second-round draft pick Rocco Grimaldi tweets Bible

verses. An invocation is given before the "Gentlemen, start your engines!" command at many motor sports events, including NASCAR.

"I often think about the same thing," said Patton Dodd, managing editor at *Patheos*, a website that is dedicated to religion and spirituality, and author of *The Tebow Mystique*. "I often think about Troy Polamalu, who you will hear *Pittsburgh Steelers* players say is the most religious athlete in football. He crosses himself before every play and sometimes after. He prays during plays. It is odd that there are more outspoken Christians on the Denver Broncos like Brian Dawkins. It is odd that Tebow has become this figure."

Adds James: "All we do is complain about how we don't have any positive role models in sports for young kids and specifically young males. It's all Pacman Jones, Ben Roethlisberger, or Tiger Woods. The list goes on and on.

"Tebow isn't evangelizing from the huddle, he doesn't go on TV and try to convert people to Christianity; he plays football and holds a prayer circle after the game ... If him taking a knee and thanking God after a win offends your sensibilities or upsets you, you don't have to watch."

"There are so many biblical metaphors used in the sports world that it is just a natural conversation," says High.

Reference: <http://www.usatoday.com/sports/story/2011-11-29/broncos-qb-tebow-stirs-debate-on-religion-and-sports/51663956/1>



5. Watch the DVD *Soul Surfer*

<http://www.sonypictures.com/homevideo/soulsurfer/>

Imagine you are a TV reporter. List five questions that you would want to put to Bethany, the young surfer who lost her arm in a shark attack. Write a message for her *Facebook* page.

6. Read this quotation of Ryan Hall one of the most famous Olympian runners in the USA:

"From my experience through my running career of weathering many lows and enjoying some really high mountain peak experiences, I have felt that the sweetest part of running is feeling God with me as I run, and the great thing about that is it isn't something that only one person or a couple of people can experience in a race. We can all experience it. We can all feel something that is even sweeter, available every time we toe the line and more lasting than winning or setting a record. Today, whenever I sign my name to an autograph I always write John 10:10 with it because it is the best part of following Jesus and having his Spirit in me – it makes life sweeter. My running is better; my daily life is better, etc. Following Jesus doesn't mean abandoning the fun things of this world; it means having more fun, being free from the worries of daily life, and experiencing things in greater, more fulfilling ways.

With that said, I can't deny that sometimes God does choose to come to the aid of maybe just one in a race allowing him/her to break free of physical limitations. One of my favorite stories in the Bible is the story of Elijah outrunning a chariot to Jezreel (a distance over a marathon...I'm pretty sure he ran faster than any of us elites are running today). Sometimes God does give supernatural strength. Knowing that God does move in this way is what makes going to the starting line such a thrilling experience for me. I believe with all my heart God can do something miraculous through me. While I cannot coerce God into moving in this way I still have childlike faith knowing it's possible, which I reflect in my running by being bold, taking chances and giving God an opportunity to do something amazing. However, I have found from my experience that often times what I hear God telling me is, "My grace is sufficient for you (2 Corinthians 12:9)." God has always provided enough strength for me to do what He wants me to do on the race course. It doesn't mean I always win or do something miraculous but I always have enough to accomplish the purpose which God called me to race for."

<http://runningtimes.com/Print.aspx?articleID=19104>

7. God doesn't make Christian sports men and women win and excel every time, so what is the attraction of Jesus to athletes?

8. Would you agree with the following comments of Ryan Hall about Jesus being a potential athlete, if He was in your suburb/village now? Give reason.

"I believe that the Bible is the best sports psychology book out there and that Jesus would have been an amazing athlete. My reasoning being that the Bible unlocks the perfect heart for athletes to compete from. The most important thing I can train is my heart. It is what drives the body. Christians should be able to compete with more freedom, less pressure and more joy. I have become better at being OK with whatever God has for me in a race knowing that at the end of the day, though I try to wrap my head around how God

moves in sport, in the end, "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts (Isaiah 55:9)."

9. Write a comment of encouragement for Ryan Hall's *Facebook* wall. He ran for the USA in the Beijing Olympics and is to run the London Olympic marathon for his country.

10. Ancient Jewish athletes did not take part in the original Olympics because of pagan religious practices, including nudity. Today some Christians are still wary of the event because they see it being an event with residual pagan religious tones. Explain their objections. What would be the response that Christian athletes like Ryan Hall might make to answer this anti Olympics position?

11. Watch the DVD *Chariots of Fire* which won lots of Academy awards. Comment on the disgrace and controversy that Eric Lidell caused by his decision not to run. Should all church and Christian school owned sports facilities be shut on Sundays? Why/why not?

12. Use a mind map to list key facts about the Paralympics Games that you find from research. Comment on this poster.



13. Look at some of the Nike and Adidas advertisements on YouTube. Are they promising the impossible or promoting responsible healthy living? Give your reasons.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bG_UDYtNXUo

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Zd_khk6zXo

This study part one of a sequence, the second of which relates to God and your body. See Beacon Media to access the second and concluding part of this study topic.

