

# A Christian Perspective on Sport

*Sport has a legitimate place in the Christian life. Sport has its basis in a divinely-given impulse to play and deserves a rightful place in Christian living. People play sport primarily for the love of the game, the thrill of competition, and the sense of community that comes from participation. When played and watched in faithfulness to God sport occupies a legitimate place as part of the created world and helps express our relationship to God and to one another. When passion for sport exceeds passion for Christ or the work of His church, or when sport becomes all-consuming and commitments such as worship, service, and family are diminished, sport poses a challenge to the consecrated life. In the light of who God is and who he calls us to be, we must examine and order our affections and priorities regarding sport.<sup>1</sup>*

## Spiritual Renewal

*“So here’s what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, playing, going-to-work, and walking around life—and place it before God as an offering.”<sup>2</sup>*

Most Christians are open to a few minor life-style adjustments if they are convinced that there is a better way. However, when it comes to sport, we may need more than behavioral modification. We may need some deep soul-searching. And before we’re done we may need a life-changing revolution. You can be sure we will not reason our way out of this cultural juggernaut. You can bet on it. We are possessed. Enthralled. Captivated. Devoted. Sport is who we are. It is what triggers adrenaline and fires our passions. The sport god is too powerful for a few good ideas and a finely tuned statement. Sport is a spiritual battle, waging war in our soul. We will not be able to drive out the dominating influence of the spirit of sport by making a few personal adjustments. What Jesus said to his disciples may be true for us: “This kind can come out only by prayer.”<sup>3</sup>

Sport has gripped the soul of our culture and it is not about to let go. In practical ways it is what many people are living for. In real terms sport dominates. ESPN and Fox Sports usher us from one mountain top religious experience to another. If culture were a formula one race car, the world of sport would be in the driver’s seat racing down track. We’re along for the ride of our lives, loving every super-charged minute of it. We see our passions and priorities whizzing by as we hit the turn at break-neck speed.

There are so many positive reasons for participating in sport both as an athlete and a spectator that if I were to list them all you would think a few excesses in the name of sport are no big deal. The good outweighs the bad *wins* the winner-take-all contest on the subject of sport. What’s not to like about the endorphin rush that comes from a good work-out or the sheer fun of playing with friends? Sport is our great stress reliever, a healthy escape from the mundane chores of life, an alternative to video gaming for our children, and something we can do together as families. Sport can direct our

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<sup>1</sup> Declaration of Sport and the Christian Life, #1 (6/2014). See appendix for more information.

<sup>2</sup> Rom 12:1 (modified from the Message).

<sup>3</sup> Mark 9:29.

competitive drive and challenge us to excel physically and socially, teaching us how to grow through defeat and win with humility. Sport is good. We are made in God's image and play is fundamental to our personal identity. Life without the fun of recreation runs against the grain of creation. God made us to run, swim, throw, bike, surf, skate, jump, and play. God made us to run fast, run patterns, run marathons, run sprints, run laps, and run to win.

Those who enjoy sport the most are those who understand its immense value in the moral, physical and spiritual scheme of God's created order. They can say, "It's only a game," without being dismissive. Sport has its place in a theology of play, right up there with playing the violin or writing a poem or painting a picture. We have a God-given capacity to play, to compete, to press our physical limits, to excel in endurance and to discipline our bodies for physical performance. Brian Bolt writes,

"People play sports primarily for the love of the game, the love of the competition, the love of doing something well, and the love of the community in which they participate. When we do sports well, we nurture this love as a spectacular gift and remind ourselves of the giver of all good things."<sup>4</sup>

In *The Good Game*, Shirl Hoffman writes,

The primary benefits of sports are found in playing. These include, among others, testing personal limits, disciplining oneself in pursuit of excellence, personal insights that come from preparing one's body for challenges of competition, experiencing a sense of bodily potential and finitude, the friendships developed among fellow competitors, the joy that comes from bodily expression, and healthy effects of exercise.

Secondary benefits also come from watching sports. These include, among other, the drama of watching events of a game unfold in an unpredictable manner, social stimulation, inspiration from watching athletes confront tests of the human spirit, appreciation of the aesthetics of bodily accomplishment, displays of courage, and demonstrations of excellence. The general benefits (and more) are available to any and all who play and watch."<sup>5</sup>

In the movie *Chariots of Fire* we resonate with Eric Liddell's famous line, "God made me for a purpose, but he also made me fast. And when I run I feel his pleasure." What is interesting about Liddell's statement is the juxtaposition of *purpose* and *pleasure*. Running is not his purpose; it's his pleasure. There is a significant "but" between *purpose* and *pleasure*, reinforced by "also." Purpose and pleasure are inseparable but distinguishable. Pleasure does not define purpose, but purpose contains pleasure. We were created by God to play, but play was never meant to be confused with our God-given capacity to worship. Our purpose in life transcends the pleasure of sport, as great as that pleasure may be, our purpose is far greater. For the follower of Jesus Christ sport was never meant to become a quest for transcendence, a sacred pastime, a substitute for the household of faith, a religious experience. Sport was never meant to become a competitor for the hearts and souls of eight-year old football fans and sixty-year old marathon runners.

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<sup>4</sup>Brian Bolt is a Professor of Kinesiology, Department Chair, and intercollegiate men's golf coach at Calvin College, US. His scholarly and service work includes practical connections between sport and Christianity, coaching and teaching methodology, and working with underserved youth in sport and mentoring. He is co-chair of the Sport and Christianity Group. Quote used with permission.

<sup>5</sup> Shirl Hoffman is Professor Emeritus of Exercise and Sport Science at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Quote used with permission.

## “The Game Is Everything”

I served a church in San Diego that was only a short walk to Petco Park where the Padres play ball. Following worship one Sunday, I changed into jeans and headed for the ballpark with a free ticket in hand. I’m not moralistic when it comes to playing ball on Sunday. I subscribe to a pray and play Sabbath principle that I hope is recreational in a healthy and holy way. After a full morning of worship and after preaching in two services, I’m ready for a long run or swim. But on this particular Sunday I chose the ball game over my usual workout.

My open-minded approach to sports on Sunday was challenged that day. I got to Petco Park and met up with family and friends and 40,000 fans. The place was rocking on that hot summer day. The beer was flowing and the food was flying thanks to an army of vendors selling hot dogs, cheese nachos, peanuts, and cotton-candy. The actual baseball game seemed almost lost in a sea of churning humanity. I saw the two best plays of the day on the large screen, because when they actually happened my vision was blocked by fans buying food. I had nine innings to contemplate the contrast between the worship I had just come from and the worship I was experiencing. If anyone judged the two forms of worship on the basis of numbers and passion, baseball won hands down. How does the visceral experience of a ball game match up with the invisible realities grounding holy worship in the name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit?

On that Sunday I was impressed with the competition between the two. How can the truth of our fallen human condition and God’s redemptive provision compete with the throbbing excitement of a tie game in the bottom of the ninth, one man on, and the team’s best hitter at the plate? Can the Bread and Cup compete with ballpark hot dogs? “The sports god is an enticing deity,” writes, Mark Galli, editor of Christianity Today, “he offers splendid moments of transcendence while never demanding that we take up our cross, forgive our enemies, or serve the poor.”<sup>6</sup>

The most vivid sports image in my mind dates back to the age of eight when my father took me to see a stock car race. He was not into sports, although he wrestled varsity in college and played tennis well. He taught me how to throw a hardball and play baseball. When we played catch he threw so hard my hand went numb. No kid in high school threw as hard as my father did. He knew I loved cars, so this visit to the Motorcar Speedway must have been something he did for my sake. My father was a mathematician, but his hobby was wood-working. I’m sure he preferred being in his basement wood shop, crafting a piece of furniture, to fighting the crowds at a racetrack. But just this once we went. I remember being enthralled by the speed, the sound of the engines, and the drama of it all. My eyes never left the racetrack. This was a whole new world for me. I was mesmerized, so when two cars crashed, sending one car end over end, propelling the driver out the window, high into the air, I saw it all. I saw the car land directly on the driver. Right before our eyes we saw a person die. She was dead—crushed. I still remember driving home in silence. We heard over the radio the next day that she was the mother of two small children. My dad wanted to give me a good time, but the god of sport claimed a victim that night.

Football is America’s high impact religion. After more than thirty years in sports broadcasting Howard Cosell offered a five-point summary of the sports syndrome: (1) The game is sacred and is best

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<sup>6</sup> Mark Galli, The Prodigal Sports Fan, Christianity Today, April 8, 2005, 49.

understood as a religious ritual, a thing of beauty. (2) Given the game's sacred significance, winning isn't everything: it's the only thing. (3) The context is so deeply mystifying that no ordinary person can understand sports. Only insiders can explain the game. (4) Sports provide the necessary escape that people need from the daily travail of life. Howard Cosell concluded his interview with a warning, saying that a society that looks to sport in this way "cannot prosper or even long survive."<sup>7</sup>

The NFL is a ten billion a year business with six billion coming from TV revenue. Steve Kroft of CBS' 60 Minutes says the NFL "is the American adaptation of the Roman Coliseum, a spectacle that manages to package all the primal instincts of sex, violence, tribalism, courage, joy, and disappointment." The first words aired on ESPN were, "If you love sports, if you really love sports, you'll think you died and gone to heaven."<sup>8</sup> One can only imagine the emotional trauma if sports were no longer televised. Around the clock sports coverage eclipses most everything else we do. Suited professionals discuss every imaginable dimension of the game to 100 million households that can never get enough of their beloved sports.

We are obsessed with media's ability to manipulate the game. Sports columnist David Biderman took his stopwatch to some games to tally up the number of minutes of play action. In an average nine-inning three hour baseball game, Biderman counted about fourteen minutes of action.<sup>9</sup> In football it is about three minutes less. If you are literally at the ballpark, all the rest of the time is spent spending money, eating hot dogs, drinking Coke, eyeing the fans and watching the gigantic big video screens. But if you are at home watching the game on FOX Sports, the time is filled with recorded action, including replays, clips from other games, talking heads gossiping the game, and a virtual bombardment of action-packed commercials. On the surface spectator sports should be just an innocent pastime, a fun escape to distract us from life's routine. But the time-draining, mind-numbing addiction of watching televised sports has become an obsession for millions, including many Christians.

The synapses of a brain trained to the quick visual stimulus of an NFL helmet-to-helmet hit, replayed four or five times, can hardly cope with hearing the human voice preach the Word of God. The sensual atmosphere of heart-throbbing international soccer is hardly a level playing field for singing worship songs. True worship is bound to be a challenge for sport junkies hooked on the game's adrenaline rush. Can you watch the second-to-second high impact visual impressions of the NBA or the NFL or MLB and learn to pray the Psalms? Within the inner sanctum of today's home entertainment centers, Christians are mentally, emotionally and physically manipulated and captivated by the game. No wonder Christians are bored when they come to church.

Nietzsche followed-up his famous "God is dead" declaration with a question, "How shall we comfort

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<sup>7</sup> Howard Cosell, "Sports Not 'the Answer to All of Society's Problems,'" U. S. News & World Report, Sept. 16, 1985, 74-75.

<sup>8</sup> ESPN, The Worldwide Leader in Sports, is the leading multinational, multimedia sports entertainment company featuring the broadest portfolio of multimedia sports assets with over 50 business entities. Based in Bristol, Conn., with 3,900 employees (6,500 worldwide) ESPN Plaza includes 900,000 square feet in 17 buildings on 116 acres, with additional office space (400,000 sq. ft.) rented nearby. The company is 80 percent owned by ABC, Inc., an indirect subsidiary of The Walt Disney Company. The Hearst Corporation holds a 20 percent interest in ESPN.

<sup>9</sup> The time begins when the pitcher lifts his leg to begin his pitching motion and the ball is either caught by the catcher or the batter puts it into play. Pickoff attempts and steals were also counted as action. David Biderman, The Wall Street Journal, October 6, 2010.

ourselves . . . . What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent?”<sup>10</sup> Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Kelly, two top tier philosophers from Berkeley and Harvard, claim that living in the secular age means admitting that there are no deep and hidden truths to the universe, much less revealed truths. But that does not mean we have to live in despair, especially when we have sport. According Dreyfus and Kelly the key to a hopeful life has more to do with riding a wave than abiding in the truth. Watching Roger Federer play tennis on the sacred grass of Wimbledon conveys a sense of the sacred.<sup>11</sup> Like a wave whooshing up, such an experience offers a moment of exhilaration and leaves a positive memory in its wake. In the whooshing up, Dreyfus and Kelly explain, we catch a glimpse of focused meaning. A meaning that lies both outside of us and within us.

Not surprisingly, the authors claim that this new sense of transcendence, this whooshing up, to use their expression, can be found most readily in sports. “Sports may be the place in contemporary life where Americans find sacred community most easily.”<sup>12</sup> It is beyond dispute, they claim, that sport now plays a kind of religious role in America. “There is no essential difference, really, in how it feels to rise as one in joy to sing the praises of the Lord, or to rise as one in joy to sing the praises of the Hail Mary pass. . . .”<sup>13</sup> That is not to say that sport is sacred in “any absolute sense. But there are moments in sport. . . .during which something so overpowering happens that it wells up before you as a palpable presence and carries you along as on a powerful wave. . . .That is the moment when the sacred shines.”<sup>14</sup> In the modern pantheon of American deities sport ranks alongside money, sex, and power.

It is hard to deny that sports are a phenomenon in competition with the worship of God. Sport offers an alternative focus and inspiration that builds both excitement and community. A great baseball game is a shared spiritual experience that invokes “the presence of divinities.” To underscore this spiritual value, Dreyfus and Kelly quote Albert Borgmann, a confessing Christian and philosopher of technology, who writes, “A thoughtful and graceful ballpark tunes people to the same harmonies. It inspires common pride and pleasure, a shared sense of season and place, a joint anticipation of drama. Given such attunement, banter and laughter flow naturally across strangers and unite them into a community. When reality and community inspire this way, divinity descends on the game, divinity of an impersonal and yet potent kind.”<sup>15</sup>

Christians have long been leery of “an impersonal and yet potent kind” of divinity. In the past we called this idolatry, but now we seem to embrace it as a new kind of sacred experience, one that because it is stripped of all useless metaphysical issues is no threat to our commitment to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. It is a safe idolatry. As Dreyfus and Kelly say, “The impersonal gods of baseball encourage no questions about the afterlife or the nature of the soul.”<sup>16</sup> The sacred is stripped to its “essential core.” It is the sacred presence in the absence of God that is taken with utmost seriousness, but not in an absolute sense.

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<sup>10</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich, The Gay Science, section 125, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*. Translated and Edited by Walter Kaufmann. New York: The Modern Library, 2000.

<sup>11</sup> Dreyfus, Hubert and Kelly, Sean Dorrance. *All Things Shining: Reading the Western Classics to Find Meaning in a Secular Age*. New York: Free Press, 2011, 195.

<sup>12</sup> Dreyfus & Kelly, *All Things Shining*, 192.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 192-3.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 193-4.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

I was asked to give a Bible message in a pre-game chapel for the San Diego State football team. The person who invited me offered some advice. He said, "If I were you I wouldn't tell any jokes. Before the game they're pretty serious." But his warning did not prepare me for the combat ready seriousness of the team as they took their seats in the hotel conference room. The tension was palpable. These guys were not playing a game. They were going to war. And according to ESPN, they were heading for a slaughter. I still can see the look on their faces and fear in their eyes. On this solemn occasion laughter was totally out of the question. They needed a funeral meditation or a far better motivational speaker than me. If I had to do it over again I would have preached on Isaiah 53, and what it meant for the Lamb of God to go to the slaughter on our behalf. I should have preached salvation through Christ alone. I should have given them a real life or death sermon.

### **"It's Only A Game"**

Like everyone else in my family I was riveted by the 2014 World Cup. But when I watched Germany hand a humiliating 7 to 1 defeat to Brazil, I wanted to say to the devastated Brazilian fans, including my Brazilian daughter-in-law, "It's only a game." Something is wrong when the collective self-esteem of a nation is projected on a sporting event, or when elite athletes are paid millions of dollars, or when sport is the center of our universe. The human quest for meaning and purpose was never meant to be played out on the soccer field or the tennis court or the hockey rink.

A friend of mine is an avid Alabama football fan. If you live in Alabama you'd be hard pressed to find friends who are not avid football fans. Alabamians like to say, "In Alabama we don't play football, we live football." The state is infatuated with two college football teams who assert a tremendous emotional hold on the entire state. Any pastor will tell you that a pall of sadness descends on Sunday morning worship when Alabama or Auburn are defeated Saturday afternoon. Heresy in the State of Alabama is rooting for LSU on game day.

My friend was watching Alabama play Auburn on TV with his eight year-old son. In the final seconds of the game Auburn came from behind and beat Alabama. His son burst into tears, heartbroken over his team's crushing loss in the last seconds of the game. He was nearly inconsolable, but in great company. Grown men have become so upset over a gut-wrenching Alabama loss that they have literally thrown up. Thankfully my friend saw this as a teachable moment. He put his arms around his son and calmly explained, "We love football, but it's only a game. We have to man-up when our team loses. There's a lot more important things in life than a football game. Let's keep it in perspective." He then prayed with his son. That kind of spiritual direction given to a young disciple nurtures the soul, puts life in perspective, and helps shape priorities. Several months later my friend's son's top ranked baseball team lost a close game. The team was devastated, but he saw his son going around to his teammates, encouraging them and telling them to "Man-up. Remember it's only a game. We'll get 'em next time."

"It's only a game," is not meant to be dismissive of the tremendous value that sport plays in our lives, but it is intended to put the cultural phenomenon of sport in its place. The sad fact is that sport has become for many an immortality symbol. It has taken on sacred significance, defining a person's self-worth, even a nation's collective identity. Sport gives people something to live for and feeds the

human quest for glory and transcendence. Writer David Goetz in his book *Death by Suburb* suggests that to make sports into something that important is ultimately stupid. “To win the war within is to see that not only is soccer stupid when you think your wife is dying from cancer, it’s really stupid, period. Not the game itself, of course. The game is good, even holy. It’s stupid only when it becomes my immortality symbol. When the game becomes about me.”<sup>17</sup>

### **Soul-crafting Discernment**

*“If sincerity were the same thing as faithfulness, then all would be well.”*<sup>18</sup>

We can be strangely silent on a subject that captivates us. The closest many of us pastors come to dealing with sports in the pulpit is when we comment on yesterday’s college football scores in Sunday’s sermon introduction. Yet I think we can all agree that sport is having a huge impact on our lives. The apostle Paul’s prayer for wisdom is a good starting point:

“May your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ – to the glory and praise of God.”<sup>19</sup>

Shirl Hoffman challenges Christians “to think critically about sports” and “to explore seriously how the sporting culture intersects” with the Christian life.<sup>20</sup> He leaves no doubt where he stands. He sees a wide chasm separating the Christian worldview and popular sports’ culture. He describes “SportsWorld,” “a grotesque distortion of sports,” as “narcissistic, materialistic, self-interested, violent, sensational, coarse, racist, sexist, brazen, raunchy, hedonistic, body-destroying, militaristic.”

Sport is a dominant cultural phenomenon and “light years removed from what Christians for centuries have idealized as the embodiment of the gospel message. The Christian worldview is based on an absolute, immutable, justice-loving God. The worldview of sport is based on material success. How Christians, and especially evangelicals, have managed to live in these two diametrically opposed worlds, even to the point of harnessing one to serve the other” is the focus of his book.<sup>21</sup> Hoffman laments that little thought is given to how sport promotes self assertion and self-exaltation at the expense of humility and self-denial. The juxtaposition of loving your neighbor and cultivating “the killer instinct” is not explored. As Hoffman says, “We don’t go to sporting events to see the Sermon on the Mount in action.”<sup>22</sup> Cheating, doping, violence, self-indulgence, and body-worship are not discussed.

Hoffman tells the story of psychiatrist Arnold Mandell who spent a season with the San Diego Chargers. He eventually resigned his position “after witnessing the incredible carnage up close and

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<sup>17</sup> David Goetz, *Death by Suburb: How to Keep the Suburbs from Killing Your Soul* (Harper, 2006), 49

<sup>18</sup> James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, & Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 212.

<sup>19</sup> Phil 1:9-11

<sup>20</sup> Shirl Hoffman, *The Good Game: Christianity and the Culture of Sports* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010), xiii.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

personal from the sidelines. At the last game he attended, a drunken spectator had fallen thirty feet from an upper tier seat; as a man lay jerking on the ground, Mandell thought:

[But] the players, they are doing that to each other all the time. . . broken necks and broken legs and broken ribs and fractured this and fractured that and concussions and unconsciousness. But they are in uniform and psychologically segmented off. . . They are not humans. . . and [then] suddenly it's a human being that hits the ground and jerks around. And all the while the band played and the loudspeakers gave out their announcements and the teams went on their business, and suddenly it was too naked. Suddenly that was the essence of everything, and I couldn't go back.<sup>23</sup>

Discernment is made more difficult when we are determined to find the “silver lining” in every aspect of sport no matter how contrary it may be to Christian practice. Biblical discernment and pastoral care require a decisiveness that is often at odds with the scholar's theory and the theologian's inconclusiveness. The prophets did not have the luxury of keeping all their options open. Nor do pastors in congregations or parents in families or athletes on teams. We have to do the hard work of applying the Word of God.

If we have to spend time debating the Christian legitimacy of cage fighting, we may never get to the issues that matter most on a personal and congregational level. We can be certain that the rationale for two men getting into a caged arena with the expressed purpose of beating each other to a pulp before a crazed and intoxicated crowd didn't come from Jesus. Can we not say that cage fighting is to sport what pornography is to marriage? The effort to find redeeming value in ultimate fighting strikes me as disingenuous. The Christian who hesitates to pronounce a “no” to combat fighting on grounds that it may have a cathartic effect on controlling male violence seems blind to the very basic Christian rationale for sport. Are there no limits? Is there anything in the realm of sport that requires Christians to take a stand and utter a categorical no?

“Perhaps those of us who thrive on arena combat,” writes the author of a recent Christianity Today article, “ought to do so with a sense of humility and a tinge of regret.” Watching frenetic violence may “help some of us parry the malicious feelings that might otherwise harden our hearts. But those of us who need our gladiatorial combat shows should never forget the humanity . . . of those who are risking their health for our entertainment and anger management therapy.”<sup>24</sup>

This tacit approval for something as dehumanizing and violent as ultimate fighting shows to what extent we will go to rationalize behavior and passions that have no place in the Christian life. The great danger here is not that we sound exclusionary, but that we deny that there are sinful practices. If we are destined to look for the redeeming features of gladiatorial combat we have failed to understand what it means to say, “no” to ungodliness. What would the apostle Paul have said about a sport that makes man-on-man violence its chief attraction?

“For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It teaches us to say ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope – the appearing of the glory of our great God

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 179; Mandell quoted in D. Ateyo (1979), *Blood and guts: Violence in sports* (New York: Paddington), 13.

<sup>24</sup> Gordon Marino, “The Hurting Game,” *Christianity Today*, April 2014: 54-58.



and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.”<sup>25</sup>

Perhaps, we have become impatient waiting for the return of Christ, so bored by the challenge of the great commandment and the great commission that we turn to violence to quench our insatiable appetite for excitement. The fruit of discernment will require decisive conviction even if it violates the apparent open-mindedness of our culture.

### **The Disciple-Athlete**

*“The power of sport has the potential to cloud spiritual discernment and invite both idolatry and the neglect of self, family, and church.”<sup>26</sup>*

Jesus said, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.”<sup>27</sup> This simple one line description of the Christian life underscores the life-changing impact of the gospel of grace for each and every believer. Discipleship is the costly, daily commitment of the ordinary believer. We resist compartmentalizing our faith into separate categories, as if food, work, money, sex, and sport belong to “my” personal choice whereas prayer, worship, Bible reading, and evangelism belong to God. Jesus taught that everything belongs to the spiritual disciplines and everything ought to be done in obedience to the will of God. As the apostle Paul said, “Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”<sup>28</sup>

In his novel *Freedom*, Jonathan Franzen introduces his main character a student-athlete this way: “If Patty weren’t an atheist, she would thank the good Lord for school athletic programs, because they basically saved her life and gave her a chance to realize herself as a person.”<sup>29</sup> Sport gets a lot credit these days for giving young people an identity, a sense of self-worth, and a positive outlook on life. Christian parents don’t come out and say it, but I sense that they feel sport gives their child something more tangible and useful than Jesus’ Beatitudes. It is not uncommon to find parents praising sport for giving their student-athletes self-confidence and maturity.

Chap Clark, is professor of youth, family, and culture at Fuller theological seminary. For years he has studied the effect of sport on teenagers. Clark writes, “I found that few students participate in activities because they get exercise, make friends, and so on. Certainly, some of these aspects become side benefits along the way, but for the most part, by the time athletes get to high school, the level of expectation and the pressure to perform make their participation an all-consuming commitment.”<sup>30</sup> Clark argues that in the process of getting into sport big time we have gotten out of relating to our young people in meaningful, character building ways. Competitive sports are “no longer for or about the student; they are for and about the adults in charge. The deification of competitive prominence and the defeat of one’s ‘enemies’ have choked much of the life out of the human desire to play for play’s

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<sup>25</sup> Titus 2:11-14

<sup>26</sup> Declaration on Sport and the Christian Life, #12 (6/2014).

<sup>27</sup> Luke 9:23.

<sup>28</sup> Col 3:17.

<sup>29</sup> Jonathan Franzen, *Freedom* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), 29.

<sup>30</sup> Chap Clark, *Hurt: Inside the world of today’s Teenagers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004), 115

sake and even to compete with class and honor.” Clark challenges the notion that sport builds character.

“Every adult has been reared on the notion that youth sports build character. In light of what I have seen – the advancement of the best at the expense of the weak, the preference for the skilled even as the eyes of the awkward plead for a chance, the pressure of the parent who lives vicariously through his or her child’s ‘play’ – little character is being built. I have decided just the opposite in fact. True character is built when one is rewarded for hard work, when one is willing to sacrifice for a friend or teammate, when one experiences the instilled value that proclaims the love of sport and not the lust of competition. This is perhaps the most obvious arena in which abandonment has made its mark on the adolescent psyche. We still use the rhetoric that youth sports build character, yet in reality what we have taught our children builds nothing other than arrogance, self-centeredness, and a performance ethic that is destructive to healthy, communally connected development.<sup>31</sup>

Does sport define the Christian or does the Christian define sport? For too long, sport has had its way with young believers, because of the capitulation and accommodation of well-intentioned parents. Families have bowed to the costly demands of sport. They have accepted great sacrifices in time, money, energy and emotion, demands that they never would have accepted from the church. And they have done all of this in the name of sport for what they thought was the good of their child. But in the end we Christians have conformed to the sport world. Eight year olds are pulled out of Sunday morning worship to play baseball games. Swim meets are held on Good Friday. Tournaments are played on Easter Sunday. Travel Ball and Sports Camps might as well be called Money Ball. When Paul said, “To the pure, all things are pure,” he was thinking of the powerful positive influence of the believer on culture, but I’m afraid we have been incredibly naive when it comes to the negative social and spiritual impact sport has had on our children, our families, our churches, and our mission.<sup>32</sup>

When players, coaches, and fans pray for their team, how should they pray? We are told to “Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”<sup>33</sup> That prayer may be harder to pray after the game than before, but it belongs to the believer to pray. Game-day prayers ought to keep the game in perspective, remembering that the players’ and school’s self-identity and worth does not ride on the game. Prayer reminds players that they are playing for the love of the game and the challenge of competition. Prayer reminds players of their shared humanity with one another and the opposing team. They pray for the health and well-being of their opponents as fellow image-bearers of God. In prayer they cultivate the spiritual discipline of a friendly rivalry and seek to glorify God whether they win or lose.

We lived in Bloomington, Indiana during Bobby Knight’s reign at IU. Our church was a few blocks from campus and well attended by students and faculty. IU’s fan base was broad and deep, even among people who had nothing to do with the university. On those rare occasions when a game fell on Sunday, you might just as well forget about competing with the main attraction. The congregation looked like an IU cheering section, and the minute the benediction was over they were out the door heading for Assembly Hall.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>32</sup> Titus 1:15.

<sup>33</sup> 1 Thess 5:16.

Subdued Sunday worship struck a sharp contrast with hot-blooded Hoosiers passionately cheering for their team. When IU beat Purdue in a come-from-behind-victory on Sunday, I wrote a tongue and cheek editorial to the paper suggesting that in the spirit of sport we should cancel worship services altogether when game day is Sunday. “For too long we have tried to mix the spirit of sport and the Holy Spirit on the same day,” I wrote. “Whatever we do, let’s do it right. Enough of this vacillation between boredom and basketball, even the seats are more comfortable in Assembly Hall than in most churches. Let’s face it, the old hymns of the Faith, even the new songs of praise, do not compare to the IU pep band and cheerleaders. Is any choir able to compete with the IU flag hoisted three men high before the cheering throng with IU cheerleaders bowing in adoration? What does the “Amen” of worship have to do with “Go! IU!” Let’s just go ahead and reserve the day for sport.”

When a disciple-athlete, regardless of his or her age, comes to a coach and says, “I want to quit.” The wise coach may seek to persuade otherwise, primarily for the sake of the player, but the coach will not cross the line and reason that the player is letting God down or that the player is failing to use his or her God-given gifts. That line of reasoning spiritualizes the decision-making process and infuses it with guilt. The athlete ought to enter into sport without the burden of feeling that God is compelling them to play soccer.

Parents, coaches, and players ought to understand more biblically what it means to glorify God. To glorify God is not whatever we may think it is, but what God actually says glorifies him. To glorify God does not mean spending most of your week pumping iron or giving everything you’ve got on game day. God does not want you to leave your heart out on the playing field. He wants your heart for himself. To glorify God does not mean pointing to the sky or taking a knee after you have scored a touchdown. Nor does it mean giving a sound bite for Jesus after the game. God doesn’t need our publicity, but God does desire our witness. There is a difference between publicity and witness and the difference is defined biblically. If you want to know how to glorify God, the Sermon on the Mount is a great place to begin. You will quickly learn that it is not about executing the skills of the game, but about living out the beatitudes and manifesting the visible righteousness of love instead of hate, purity instead of lust, and reconciliation instead of retaliation. If you are serious about glorifying God, you won’t find a better guide than Colossians 3:12-17. Commit that text to memory and pray it before a game.

### **“Intensity without Ultimacy” or Holy Indifference**

*“One thing I ask of the Lord, this is what I seek, that I might dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life. . .”<sup>34</sup>*

The character in *Chariots of Fire* who captures the essence of freedom in sport and exudes a “holy indifference” is Lord Lindsey. Dominic Erdozain of King’s College London observes four distinct positions in the film. In Jennie Liddell, Eric’s devout sister, an hour spent in sport is an hour spent not praying. For Jennie sport is just a game, a frivolous pass time that has no redeeming purpose. Harold Abrahams, a Jewish student at Cambridge University admits to his girl friend that he doesn’t just love running, he’s addicted to it. He sums up his view with the line, “I will raise my eyes and look down that corridor; four feet wide, with ten lonely seconds to justify my whole existence.” For Harold

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<sup>34</sup> Psalm 27:4.

Abrahams the game is everything. Erdozain is more critical of Eric Liddell's famous line than I am ("God made me for a purpose, but he also made me fast. And when I run I feel his pleasure"). For Erdozain Eric captures the ambiguity of Christians who acknowledge God's larger purposes beyond sport, but nevertheless find in sport a tool for evangelism and a special means to glorify God. As Liddell says to his sister, "It's not just fun. To win is to honor him."

Dominic Erdozain finds "the film's attempt to spiritualize the intoxication of competition" as particularly problematic. This is where Lindsey's "blend of intensity without ultimacy" is so compelling. Lindsey can give himself to the game with "unencumbered delight." He gladly exchanges his race for Liddell's which is scheduled on the Sabbath. Critics argue that Lindsey is free to do this because he is a wealthy aristocrat. His Olympic performance is no big deal because he is secure in the larger scheme of things. He is spared the indifference of Jennie Liddell, the delusion of Harold Abrahams, and the spiritualizing devotion of Eric Liddell. He loves sport for its own sake. His independence is born of his wealth and status, his aristocratic bearing, but for the Christian this "holy difference" flows from his abiding relationship with Jesus Christ. Lindsey's freedom, reasons Erdozain, "is no greater than that of a Christian whose cosmic certainty liberates her for that easy and unselfconscious enjoyment of the world that C. S. Lewis considered the mark of true humility: the ungrasping security that enables her 'to enjoy life so easily.'"<sup>35</sup>

This blend of "intensity without ultimacy" captures a theology of play grounded in creation and redemption. This is the freedom that soul-crafting parents and coaches desire to convey to their children and student athletes. There is a critical difference between the way of nature and the way of grace that deserves to be understood and embraced.

Eric Liddell's story did not end with the 1924 Olympics. Liddell proved to be an outstanding example of spiritual stamina and Christ-centered endurance. He obeyed the call of God to go to China as a missionary where he served until his death. He saw Jesus leading him to China for a life of service and hardship far more demanding than the Olympics. Eric Liddell put behind him the events that made him famous, and ran the marathon of faith with his eyes fixed on Jesus. A friend of mine, David Michell (former Canadian director of OMF), remembered Eric Liddell from his experience as a young boy when he, along with 174 other children of missionary parents, were imprisoned in a Japanese Internment Camp in China during WWII. Eric Liddell was a prisoner at the same camp and became known for his Christ-like presence and his selfless devotion to helping the children in the camp. Liddell died of a brain tumor three days before the Allies arrived, but right up to the end, Liddell's reputation as a follower of Jesus was evident to all.

Jesus said some pretty radical things without immediate clarification and commentary. At times he let bold, outlandish statements hang out there to shock people into paying attention and changing their ways. One of those offensive lines was when Jesus said, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, even his own life, he cannot be my disciple."<sup>36</sup> That would be like me saying on Sunday morning in my church in Alabama that if you are truly serious about following Lord Jesus Christ you will hate Alabama football. From that point on, I'm not sure the congregation would allow me to explain what I meant.

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<sup>35</sup> Dominic Erdozain, "In Praise of Folly: Sport as Play," Anvil Journal, <http://anviljournal.org/> see 28:1 (June 2012).

<sup>36</sup> Luke 14:26.

Is the love of family an integral part of costly, cross-bearing discipleship? Sure it is. What Jesus took away from the willing disciple was the temptation to make family more important than the cost of discipleship. Family was never meant to be the excuse that distances us from following Christ. On the contrary, family provides the opportunity and context for loving the Lord Jesus with all our heart, mind, strength and soul, and our neighbor as ourselves. Is the love of sport an integral part of costly, cross-bearing discipleship? Yes, indeed. What Jesus rebukes and rejects is the temptation to make too much of sport, to make of it a god alongside our Christian faith. When sport becomes a competitor against the Lord for our devotion and worship, we need to hear his radical word and repent. When we live our lives centered on sport instead of the Lord Jesus we will let the sport's world dictate our priorities and ethics. Sport was never meant to be the excuse that distances us from following Christ. On the contrary, sport provides the opportunity and the context to serve the Lord Jesus with our whole being and our neighbor as ourselves.

The apostle Paul challenged believers, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."<sup>37</sup> The best way to put sport in its true place and to overcome whatever false devotion it may represent, be it idolatry or an inordinate obsession or a materialistic indulgence or fixation of life, is by dwelling on the positive and fulfilling good that God has built into life. In the Spirit and to the glory of the Father, Christ calls us to recover the lost meaning and true enjoyment of a theology of play, the fun of competition, and the comradery of community. By practicing Jesus' kingdom ethic we can discover the value of sport's intensity without ultimacy. We can be freed up to embrace the joy of the game. We can accept the apostle's challenge, "Live as children of light, for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth. Figure out what will please Christ, and then do it."<sup>38</sup>

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## *Appendix*

*The call for Christians to be a faithful presence in sport has never been more urgent. Concerned by the state of sport and the failure of the broader Christian community to engage the sport culture, The Sport and Christianity Group, a small gathering of coaches, theologians and academics met in Raleigh, North Carolina in January 2013. The intent was to draft a "Declaration on Sport and the Christian Life" affirming a Christian position on sport that would be endorsed by the global Christian community. Additional revisions of the Declaration were made at follow-up meetings in Waco, Texas in June 2013 and in Grand Rapids, Michigan in June 2014 based on feedback the group solicited from individuals and focus groups. See more at [www.sportandchristianity.com](http://www.sportandchristianity.com).*

### **Declaration on Sport and the Christian Life**

Sport enriches life. The urge to play sport is a divine gift, a vibrant, God-honoring pursuit in the lives of Christians regardless of race, gender, physical and intellectual ability, or sexuality. But like all such gifts, without purposeful stewardship it can be separated from its divine intent. This call to stewardship is essential in a society where sport is often distorted by moral relativism and an unhealthy fixation on winning. Compounding this problem is the human tendency for our love of

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<sup>37</sup> Rom 12:21

<sup>38</sup> Eph 5:8-10.

sport to easily morph into idolatry.

The call for Christians to be a faithful presence in sport has never been more urgent. Concerned by the state of sport and the failure of the broader Christian community to engage the sport culture, The Sport and Christianity Group, a small gathering of coaches, theologians and academics met in Raleigh, North Carolina in January 2013. The intent was to draft a “Declaration on Sport and the Christian Life” affirming a Christian position on sport that would be endorsed by the global Christian community. Additional revisions of the Declaration were made at follow-up meetings in Waco, Texas in June 2013 and in Grand Rapids, Michigan in June 2014 based on feedback the group solicited from individuals and focus groups.

This Declaration on Sport and the Christian Life is intended to encourage dialogue and action by Christians and leaders of Christian institutions. The Sport and Christianity Group calls for all Christians to stand with us in this effort to be a faithful presence in the world of sport by endorsing these principles.

1. Sport has a legitimate place in the Christian life. Sport has its basis in a divinely-given impulse to play and deserves a rightful place in Christian living. People play sport primarily for the love of the game, the thrill of competition, and the sense of community that comes from participation. When played and watched in faithfulness to God sport occupies a legitimate place as part of the created world and helps express our relationship to God and to one another. When passion for sport exceeds passion for Christ or the work of His church, or when sport becomes all-consuming and commitments such as worship, service, and family are diminished, sport poses a challenge to the consecrated life. In light of who God is and who He calls us to be, we must examine and order our affections and priorities regarding sport.

2. Sport touches all dimensions of human life. God created humans as holistic, unified creatures. Sport engages us, not only bodily, but mind and spirit as well. It can powerfully affect our emotions, mental states, and spiritual lives. Our experiences in sport can, at times, uplift as well as disappoint us. When sport is viewed only as a physical activity, participants miss important transcendent moments that engage one’s entire being.

3. Sport can be a means of spiritual formation. Christians acknowledge the bodily dimension of spirituality and practice faith in and through sport as embodied people. Like aesthetic endeavors, sport can remind us that God is the source of all strength, grace, and beauty of movement. Sport can help focus our attention on the reality of God and our humanness in special ways offering formative experiences in which God communes with us. When sport is approached self-indulgently and apart from the wisdom of God, spiritual growth is thwarted, hindering our formation.

4. Sport can glorify God. To glorify God is to reflect the will and way of Christ in everything. Thus, the quality of the Christian’s play and participation should be distinctive, marked by Spirit-informed virtues including love, hope, faith, patience, kindness, humility, self-control and other fruit of God’s Spirit. Success in sport competition can help garner public acclaim for oneself, one’s team, one’s community, or one’s country. These forms of glory should not be confused with bringing glory to God.

5. Competition is an essential element of sport. In competition, players test their skills and strategies in an environment of uncertainty and drama. Competition provides opportunities for

personal growth, friendship and enjoyment, and can lead to maximum athletic performance. During games, relationships are characterized by a playful antagonism in which competitors elevate their own interests above those of their opponents. This playful antagonism is central to the concept of sport. However, when winning becomes an end in itself it can breed resentment and may dishonor God. Tactics and environments that persuade players, coaches and fans to supplant playful antagonism with mean-spiritedness have no place in a Christian approach to sport.

6. The true value of sport is inherent in the experience itself. We can delight in our role as Christ-followers in the world of sport and understand that our behavior in contests is a form of witness to the kingdom of God. Our experience in sport reveals our playfulness, our desire to be excellent, and our desire to belong. When the human experience of sport is subverted to other ends, for example, as a means of commerce, a way to achieve fame, publicity, money, or personal glory, attention is diverted from the importance of the sport experience itself.

7. Sport has many benefits but they are conditional. When we do sport well it has the potential to improve health, develop social and familial relationships, strengthen moral character, foster positive life habits and civic engagement, and act as a vehicle for peace, reconciliation, and the witness of the good news of Jesus Christ. But these effects are conditional. Their realization depends upon the moral and symbolic meanings we give to sport as well as the motivations of the participants. It should not be assumed that sport, irrespective of these considerations, will have its intended beneficial effects.

8. God created our bodies for His service and our enjoyment. Sport can promote physical health and well-being and encourage the stewardship of our bodies. At the same time, sport entails a risk of injury and the potential for abuse. Sometimes sport encourages violence as part of a competitive strategy and elevates the probability of injury beyond a reasonable level. An unhealthy pursuit of excellence can encourage the use of questionable training habits and harmful performance-enhancing practices. The human body is a reflection of the image of God and such practices should not be condoned.

9. God does not favor one player or team over another. In a Christian view of sport God is acknowledged as Father of all who compete. All players, coaches, and fans – regardless of team affiliation – are created in the image of God and are deserving of Christian goodwill, kindness, and love. God should not be portrayed as favoring one competitor over another. When the culture of sport encourages us to think of our opponents as less than human, less honorable, less deserving of Christian love, or less loved by God than ourselves, it is a sign that sport has gone awry and is not serving its divine purpose.

10. Christian virtues are revealed in behaviors that go beyond obeying the rules. Rules governing sport define how games are to be played and ensure a measure of fairness in competition. By joining the game, players implicitly agree to follow the rules. Therefore, Christians should not seek ways to circumvent the rules governing sport contests. Yet, Christians are bound by a higher calling, not only to obey the rules, but to apply self-imposed behaviors upholding the witness of Christ even when such acts might work to their competitive disadvantage.

11. Sport programs are a vital component of Christian education. Sport is an effective complement to classroom knowledge when wisely integrated into Christian schools and universities. Participating in sport can lead students to truth and assist them in developing a mature faith. This

requires careful thought and planning with an eye toward educational outcomes. When institutions disproportionately emphasize sport or yield the purpose and practice of sport programs to those interested only in winning, they undermine the educational promise of sport.

12. Sport is powerful. Sport inspires us with displays of grit and grace. Competitive drama moves us in ways that few other forms of entertainment do. Watching sport can be a means of celebrating God's creation and goodness, leading to a spirit of hope and joy. Left unchecked, passion can lead to obsession. The power of sport has the potential to cloud spiritual discernment and invite both idolatry and the neglect of self, family, and church.