

A Christian Perspective on Sports: Intensity without Ultimacy

Sports has gripped the soul of our culture and it is not about to let go. ESPN and Fox Sports usher us from one mountain top religious experience to another. Sports triggers our adrenaline and fires our passions. We are possessed, enthralled, and captivated by the spiritual power of sports. It does more than entertain us, it defines us. Yet, there are so many positive reasons for participating in sports both as an athlete and a spectator that if I were to list them all you would reason that a few excesses in the name of sport should be no big deal.

What's not to like about the endorphin rush that comes from a good work-out or the sheer fun of playing with friends? Sports is a 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. Sports can direct our competitive drive and challenge us to excel physically and socially, teaching us how to grow through defeat and win with humility. 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 universe. 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.

The Game Is Everything

I served a church in San Diego that was only a short walk from 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. I got to Petco Park and met up with family and friends and 40,000 fans on a warm Sunday afternoon. The place was rocking, 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 particular 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."¹

Football is America's high impact religion. The NFL is a ten billion a year business with six billion coming from TV revenue. According to Steve Kroft of CBS' 60 Minutes 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."² A new priesthood of sportscasters explores every imaginable dimension of the game for one hundred million households that can never get enough of their beloved sports. On the surface spectator sports should be just an innocent pastime, a fun escape to distract us from life's routine. But if we drill down a little deeper we'll probably realize that sports is having a huge impact on how we think and live.

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 we 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.

¹ Mark Galli, The Prodigal Sports Fan, Christianity Today, April 8, 2005, 49.

² 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.

Nietzsche followed-up his famous “God is dead” declaration with a question, “How shall we comfort ourselves What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent?”³ 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 sports. According Dreyfus and Kelly, “Sports may be the place in contemporary life where Americans find sacred community most easily.”⁴ 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. . .”⁵ 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.”⁶ Sports has an honored place in the modern pantheon of American deities.

We lived in Bloomington, Indiana during Bobby Knight’s basketball 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 worship. The congregation looked like an IU cheering section, and the minute the benediction was over they were out the door heading for Assembly Hall. Our rather subdued Sunday worship was in sharp contrast to the hot-blooded Hoosiers passionately cheering their basketball team.

When IU beat Purdue in a come-from-behind-victory one 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

³ Nietzsche, Friedrich, *The Gay Science*, section 125, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*. Translated and Edited by Walter Kaufmann. New York: The Modern Library, 2000.

⁴ 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.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 192-3.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 194.

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 set aside Game-Day-Sundays for Basketball.”

It’s Only A Game

When Germany handed a humiliating seven to one defeat to Brazil in the 2014 World Cup, I wanted say to the devastated Brazilian fans, “It’s only a game.” It seems wrong when the collective self-esteem of a nation is projected on to a sporting event. The human quest for meaning and purpose was never meant to be played out on the soccer field or tennis court or hockey ring. 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.” 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 its 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. 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.”

Somehow we have to learn how to put the cultural phenomenon of sports in its place. Sadly, for many sports has become an immortality symbol. It has taken on sacred significance, defining a person’s self-worth, even a nation’s collective identity. Sports gives people something to live for and feeds the human quest for glory and transcendence. Writer David Goetz 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.”⁷

Those who enjoy sports the most are those who understand its immense value in the

⁷ David Goetz, *Death by Suburb: How to Keep the Suburbs from Killing Your Soul* (Harper, 2006), 49

moral, physical and spiritual scheme of God's created order. They can say, "It's only a game," without being dismissive. Sports 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. Calvin College's 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."⁸

A Call for Discernment

Shirl Hoffman challenges Christians "to think critically about sports" and "to explore seriously how the sporting culture intersects" with the Christian life.⁹ Hoffman sees a wide chasm separating a Christian perspective on sports and the popular "grotesque distortion of sports" which he describes as "narcissistic, materialistic, self-interested, violent, sensational, coarse, racist, sexist, brazen, raunchy, hedonistic, body-destroying, militaristic." 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 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."¹⁰

Discernment is made more difficult when we determine to find the "silver lining" in every aspect of sports no matter how contrary it may be to Christian practice. If we have to spend time debating the Christian legitimacy of cage fighting, we may never get to the real issues that matter most. We can safely say 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 doesn't come from Jesus. Cage fighting is to sports what pornography is to marriage. The effort to find redeeming value in ultimate fighting strikes me as lunacy. The Christian who hesitates to

⁸Brian Bolt is a Professor of Kinesiology, Department Chair, and intercollegiate men's golf coach at Calvin College, US.

⁹ Shirl James Hoffman, *Christianity and the Culture of Sports* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010), xiii.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 179.

pronounce a “no” to cage fighting on grounds that it may have a cathartic effect on controlling male violence seems blind to the very basic Christian rationale for sports. Are there no limits? Is there anything in the realm of sports that requires Christians to utter a categorical no?

Jesus said, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.”¹¹ This simple one-liner 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 were meant to resist compartmentalizing our faith in Christ into separate categories, as if food, work, money, sex, and sport belong to the realm of personal choice and prayer, worship, Bible reading, and evangelism belong to God. Jesus taught his followers 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.”¹²

Chap Clark, is professor of youth, family, and culture at Fuller theological seminary. For years he has studied the effect of sports 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.”¹³ For Clark sports has become a substitute for 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 sake and even to compete with class and honor.” Clark challenges the notion that sport builds character. “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. . . . 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.”¹⁴

Christian families are bowing to the costly demands of sport. They are willing to make great sacrifices in time, money, and energy but in the end they are sacrificing their child to the

¹¹ Luke 9:23.

¹² Col 3:17.

¹³ Chap Clark, *Hurt: Inside the world of today’s Teenagers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004), 115

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 119.

all-consuming phenomenon of sports. 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 the apostle 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.¹⁵

As parents, coaches, and players we ought to understand what it means to glorify God. To glorify God is not whatever we may think it is, but what God actually says it is. To glorify God doesn’t mean spending most of the week pumping iron or leaving your heart out on the playing field on game day. God 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 publicity; God wants our witness. The Sermon on the Mount is a great place to begin, if we want to know how to glorify God. We will discover 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 want to be serious about glorifying God, memorize Colossians 3:12-17 and let that be your action plan, make that your prayer before a game.

Holy Indifference

The character in *Chariots of Fire* who captures the essence of freedom in sports 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 frivolous pass time that has no redeeming purpose. Harold Abrahams, a Jewish student at Cambridge 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 Abrahams the game is everything.

Erdozain is somewhat critical of 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.” For Erdozain, Eric captures the ambiguity of Christians who acknowledge God’s larger purposes beyond sports, but nevertheless

¹⁵ Titus 1:15.

find in sports 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 exchanged his race for Liddell’s which was scheduled on the Sabbath.

Some have suggested that Lindsey felt magnanimous because he was a wealthy aristocrat. Perhaps his Olympic performance meant little to him because he was secure in the larger scheme of life. He was spared the indifference of Jennie Liddell, the delusion of Harold Abrahams, and the spiritualizing devotion of Eric Liddell. Lindsey could afford to be playful and selfless because of his wealth and status. Maybe so, but in any case 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.’”¹⁶

This blend of “intensity without ultimacy” captures a theology of play grounded in creation and redemption. This is the freedom that caring parents and coaches seek to nurture in their children and student athletes. The Christian’s “holy indifference” towards sports as well as all the passions that compete for first place in our lives is rooted in an abiding relationship with Jesus Christ. We are free to enjoy sports without turning sports into an idol that demands sacrifices and priorities reserved for God alone.

Jesus was in the habit of driving his truth home in radical ways. One of the boldest lines he ever spoke contrasted devotion to him to devotion to family. He 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.”¹⁷ Modify the comparison and you get the Tuscaloosa pastor saying on Sunday morning, “If you are truly serious about following Lord Jesus Christ you will hate Alabama football.”

Let’s be clear. The love of family is an integral part of costly discipleship. What Jesus meant by his radical comparison was that family must never become an excuse that distances us from following him. Loving our family provides the opportunity for loving the Lord our God with all our heart, mind, strength and soul, and our neighbor as ourselves. Is the love of sports an integral part of cross-bearing discipleship? Yes, indeed. What Jesus rejects is the temptation to

¹⁶ Dominic Erdozain, “In Praise of Folly: Sport as Play,” Anvil Journal, <http://anviljournal.org/> see 28:1 (June 2012).

¹⁷ Luke 14:26.

make too much of sports, to turn sports into a god placed alongside Christ. When sports becomes a competitor against the Lord for our devotion and worship, we need to hear Jesus' radical word and repent. Sports can provide a significant opportunity to serve the Lord Jesus with our whole being and our neighbor as ourselves. Sports was never meant to be the excuse that distances us from following Christ.

Almighty God, you alone can bring into order the unruly wills and affections of sinners: Grant your people grace to love what you command and desire what you promise; that, among the swift and varied changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed where true joys are to be found; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen (The Book of Common Prayer, Fifth Sunday in Lent).

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