

Sports and the Christian

— David W. Cunningham —



It is amazing to think that perhaps the most popular song in America today is “Take Me Out to the Ballgame.” Think about it. During the seventh-inning stretch at nearly every ballpark in the country, millions and millions of fans sing this silly but addictively catchy little song. We all know it. We can all sing it (“for it’s one, two, three strikes you’re out at the ol’ ballgame!”). Why would such a silly song about a ballgame be so popular? The answer is no less than obvious—it is because we live in a global culture that is gah-gah over sports. **The world is more than just intrigued by sports, it is obsessed.**

As I write this article, major sporting events all over the world are drawing the attention of the masses. In one weekend alone, there was tennis’ French Open, horse racing’s Belmont Stakes, the NBA Finals, the NHL playoffs, stock car racing’s Pocono 500, the World Cup of men’s soccer, several golf tournaments and a full slate of Major League Baseball games. I could go on and on in every season. And that’s just a sampling of professional sporting events.

According to the National Institute for Sports Reform (NISR), the nationwide figures regarding amateur sports participation are no less than stagger-

ing. In an article entitled, *Crisis on Our Playing Fields*, the NISR reveals that “roughly 22 million 6-18 year olds participate in youth sports programs such as Little League baseball and Pop Warner football; approximately 16 million athletes are involved in intramural or interscholastic sports; 2 million are involved in club or fee-based programs; and 332,000 are involved in intercollegiate athletics.”¹

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Because athletics are such a huge and influential part of our culture, we as God’s people must develop and maintain a proper biblical perspective of sports and examine all things through the lens of Scripture. I want to briefly identify and consider both the positive and negative aspects of modern-day athletics and help us collectively advance toward a healthy, biblical, working theology of sports.

PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

While the genesis of sports is not known, the researchers at *Encyclopedia Britannica* provide some brief thoughts to consider.

“Play is an integral part of human nature. Throughout history, humans have invented sporting

and gaming activities as a means to socialize, to display skills and prowess, and to entertain or offer excitement. The earliest games may have been based on hunting and gathering activities. In modern times, with the emergence of professional sports, games continue to serve as physical and emotional outlets, as diversions, and as enrichments to daily life while also playing a pronounced economic role.”²

Though the world has clearly seen a gradual development in participation levels and the ultimate organization and systemization of sports in recent centuries, even the most youthful Bible students know that the Scriptures repeatedly use specific athletic terminology. While the Old Testament contains some allusions to running, throwing, shooting and other physical activities, there are very few passages, if any, that make us believe that organized athletics were a major part of the culture at that time. But as we move into the New Testament era there is a distinct recognition that competitive sports had arrived on the scene. The principal events of the day included the Olympic Games in Olympia and the Isthmian Games near Corinth. In their infancy, it is interesting to note that both of these major athletic contests were closely associated with pagan rituals. The ancient Olympics, which were the premier games held every four years, were originally a tribute to the Greek god Zeus. The Isthmian Games were held every

other year in a sacred grove dedicated to the god Poseidon.

While the Apostle Paul in particular often used athletic examples to illustrate spiritual truths, the Scriptures themselves neither endorse nor condemn participation in sports. Their frequent mention in the New Testament confirms that athletics were a major part of the culture during the days of the writing of the inspired text. That being said, if Paul in any way deemed athletics to be sinful he surely would not have used them to illustrate the Christian life. While not an exhaustive list, the following is a sampling of the usage of athletic terminology in the New Testament:

Acts 13:25 "...while John was completing his course"

Acts 20:24 "...so that I may finish my course"

Romans 9:16 "...the man who runs"

1 Corinthians 9:24 "...those who run in a race all run...run in such a way that you may win"

1 Corinthians 9:25 "...compete in the games"

1 Corinthians 9:26 "...run in such a way...box in such a way"

1 Corinthians 9:27 "...discipline my body"

Galatians 2:2 "...I might be running or had run in vain"

Galatians 5:7 "...you were running well"

Philippians 2:16 "...I did not run in vain nor toil in vain"

Philippians 3:14 "...I press on toward the goal for the prize"

1 Timothy 1:18 "...fight the good fight"

1 Timothy 6:12 "...fight the good fight of faith"

2 Timothy 4:7 "...fought the good fight, I have finished the course"

Hebrews 12:1 "...let us run with endurance the race that is set before us"

FUNDAMENTAL CHANGES

While it would not be fair or accurate to recklessly lump every participant and every parent in the

same category, there do appear to have been noticeable and fundamental changes that have impacted athletics in recent years, especially in youth sports. Below are three fundamental changes that I believe have adversely affected the landscape of sports as we know them:

If there ever was an innocence in sports it is now gone.

Parental Involvement: While the number of children participating in organized sports continues to rise,³ there appears to be a fundamental change in why kids are "suing up." For whatever reason, many parents today are making their children participate in sports. Perhaps they are dreaming of their little Johnny or Suzie someday making it to the big time or, perhaps worse, they are attempting to live vicariously through their children. Whereas most kids used to play sports for the present enjoyment and challenge of participation, now many play for the potential of future gain—whether it be a college scholarship or a professional career.

In his best-selling book, *Comeback*, former major league pitcher and Christian cancer survivor Dave Drapecky illustrates the slim odds of a kid actually playing in the major leagues when he says,

"Every year in America hundreds of thousands of kids go out to play little league, and every year each of them dreams of playing in the major leagues. The odds are so slim. It's as if you had a huge stadium jammed full of kids, each wearing a uniform and a glove, and just one out of all those thousands got picked to come down on to the field and play with the big boys."⁴

Yet this is the very carrot that parents seem to want persistently dangled in front of their often times less-than-enthusiastic child.

Sports Illustrated columnist Rick

Reilly refers to this parental obsession as "upping." He says, "For some reason over-caffeinated parents feel they have to keep up with the Joneses. They used to do it with their cars. Now they do it with their kids."⁵ It's no wonder that many kids aren't playing sports for the same reason they once did because their parents are working their own agendas.

Win-at-all-Cost Mentality: If there ever was an innocence in sports it is now gone. Sports are big business. If you turn to your local newspaper's sports page you will find the odds makers' line on not only professional games but major college games as well. Communities, schools, institutions of higher learning and professional franchises seem to be tolerant of many things as long as their teams are winning, but heads will roll if the squads begin to lose. Many youth traveling teams now even have a general manager and a business manager so that the coaches can concentrate solely on winning. The win-at-all-cost mentality has subsequently produced scandal at all levels of sport. We read of parents punching umpires after Little League games because their kid "got cheated." We read of professional athletes taking illegal steroids and other drugs to gain a competitive advantage. We read of college athletes being indicted for intentionally affecting the outcome of a game for personal financial gain. We read of coaches who have intentionally broken recruiting rules in hopes of landing the "big one." All of these actions are a direct result of ungodly, sinful, win-at-all-cost pursuits, motivated ultimately by money, pride, prestige and greed.

The secular Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics agrees:

"At the heart of these problems [in sports] is a profound change in the American culture of sports itself. At one time, that culture was defined by colleges, high schools, summer leagues, and countless community recreational programs. Amateurism was a cherished ideal. In such a context, it made sense to

regard athletics as an educational undertaking. Young people were taught values ranging from fitness, cooperation, teamwork, and perseverance to sportsmanship as moral endeavor. All of that seems somehow archaic and quaint today.”

The win-at-all-cost mentality has not only aided in the overall corruption of sports in general, it has also had a trickle-down affect on the church and church attendance. Again Reilly hits a home run when he says, “...Sports [are] becoming this country’s main religion. Priests and pastors across the country have noticed something lately; God is competing more and more with Sunday sports—and losing. Especially with youth sports.”? Whereas in years past Sundays seemed to be off limits for sports teams to practice or play, today it is an accepted and cherished day, just like the other six days of the week. All because the world really does agree with coaching legend Vince Lombardi who once said, “Winning

isn’t everything, it is the only thing.”

The lure of technology: When I was a kid, my friends and I spent much of our free time in the back yard playing wiffle ball or kick ball or shooting hoops. Kids today don’t seem to do much of that any more. Now kids are lured by technology and spend much of their discretionary time watching TV, staring at the computer or playing hi-tech electronic games. As a result, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics, obesity rates among children are at epidemic proportions.” For the most part, kids today won’t play athletic games unless they are organized—and even then many still have to be prodded.

THE UPSIDE OF SPORTS

Athletics have always been a huge part of my life. In my 43 years on this planet, I have been a part of literally thousands of athletic contests as a player, a coach or a spectator. Many of my most memorable life experiences have been associated with sports. Perhaps

the greatest thrill of my youth was the day my 12-and-under baseball team won the Midwest Regional Championship and earned the right to play in the Pee Wee Reese World Series in Forest Park, Georgia. While there are a myriad of concerns with the modern-day infatuation with sports, there are many potentially positive aspects of sports as well.

Participation in sports can be a good primer in the development of moral character. There can be much value in learning to be a member of a team, learning discipline, learning to properly handle disappointment and praise, learning to sacrifice for the good of the team, learning the value of hard work and perseverance and learning to respect and obey authority.

Participation in sports can be a way for an athlete to use his God-given abilities and talents for His glory (1 Corinthians 10:31).

Participation in sports can aid in maintaining the health of our bodies as temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19).

Participation in sports can provide an avenue to serve God and have an impact on the lives of others (teammates, coaches, and fans).

Participation in sports can aid in keeping kids from being involved in detrimental activities.

Sports can be an effective tool for evangelism and discipleship.

Sports can aid in unifying a school, a community, a state and even a nation.

Sports provide jobs and pour significant amounts of money into the economy.

THE DOWNSIDE OF SPORTS

John Gerdy, author of *Sports: The All-American Addiction*, gives a fair and honest appraisal when he says,

“...organized sport in America is not all bad. There are plenty of coaches and athletic programs committed to instilling positive values in participants. There are thousands of athletes who benefit greatly from athletic participation. And there is a degree of value in sports’ entertainment function. But



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while it is not all bad, it is clearly not what it is supposed to be. The fact is, an honest, rational argument can be made that organized sports' overall influence within our culture has become more negative than positive, that the moral basis upon which it was built has crumbled to dust and, as a result, has left it devoid of meaning. Merely the fact that such an argument can be made should certainly give us reason to pause."⁹

And pause we must. There are a growing number of troubling aspects to sports that we as God's people must honestly consider.

THE GLORIFICATION AND IDOLIZATION OF MEN

While it can be appropriate to rightly appreciate an athlete's skill and propensity to achieve certain goals, to elevate a man to god-like status is an affront to the one and only true and living God who alone is wor-

thy of our worship. Likewise, the pursuit of fame is counter-biblical and spiritually dangerous.

AN UNHEALTHY TIME COMMITMENT AND MISPLACED PRIORITIES

For many today the sun rises and falls on the success of their favorite player(s) and team(s). Many spend the vast majority of their free time playing and watching sports at the detriment of personal Bible study, prayer, church attendance, evangelism, Christian fellowship and worship. Countless marriages and families have been adversely affected by an obsessive commitment to sports as well. Contributors to the ultimate deterioration of these God-ordained relationships are the growing popularity of fantasy sports leagues,¹⁰ the allure of gambling, the enticement of time-demanding involvement in a smorgasbord of sporting endeavors, and the outrageous expense of sporting events and equipment. How we spend

our time and our finances is a good barometer of who or what we worship.

THE PROPAGATION AND REINFORCEMENT OF UNGODLY PURSUITS

Someone once said that "athletics do not necessarily teach character—they reveal it." While that may be inherently true, the greater concern is the residue that often remains from the explosive world of competitive sports. There often is an "anything goes" mentality associated with sports. Supposedly because "winning is everything," some even wrongly rationalize that Christians are exempt from acting "Christianly" during an athletic contest. I vividly remember the words of my (supposed) Christian coach during my first junior football practice as a child. Paraphrasing, he said, "Football is not a game for sissies. It's kill or be killed. Anything goes inside the lines of that field." He then took valuable practice time to teach the team how to intimidate the opposing players by "trash talking" and how to (at the bottom of a pile of players) reach through the ear holes of the other team's helmets and pull their hair. Often sinful values like self-centeredness, pride,


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greed, anger and violence are the unfortunate result of the dog-eat-dog world of sports. The secular media, which has exacerbated the problem, even seems to glamorize and hype the lives of athletes and popularizes their misbehavior both on and off the field.

SPORTSOLOGY: A THEOLOGY OF SPORTS

In a recent column of the Christian magazine *Sport Spectrum*, I read that more than 96% of the people in the world play sports, are sports fans, or have a close family member or friend interested in sports—hence giving them a reason to have interest. As followers of Christ, we must not only have a biblical perspective on sports that we share with others, but one that affects the way we live:

The Westminster Shorter Catechism reminds us that the chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever¹¹ (1 Peter 4:11; 11 Corinthians 5:9). As God's people we are to bring glory to Him in all that we say and do (Colossians 3:17; 1 Corinthians 10:31). Our interaction with, and involvement in, athletics must be brought under the Lordship of Christ.

While there are certainly a number of profitable benefits from physical exercise and bodily training, the Scriptures teach that they are of limited value in comparison to the wonderful and glorious benefits of godliness (1 Timothy 4:8).

We have been "fearfully and wonderfully made" by our loving and gracious God, who created us with the capacity and desire for physical pleasure (play, work, sex, eating, etc.). Within His stated parameters, it pleases God for Him to see His children using the physical gifts and talents that He gave them for His ultimate glory (James 1:17; Psalm 139:13-16; Acts 14:17; 1 Timothy 6:17; 1 Corinthians 4:7; Colossians 3:23).

Because of sin, however, our desires for pleasure are often times impure, distorted, and out of balance. Our desire for pleasure should never supersede our desire to please and obey God (Genesis 3:6; Ecclesiastes 2:1-11; Romans 5:12; 6:14).

There is nothing intrinsically sinful about competing, participating in sporting activities or enjoying athletics as long as we do not compromise our God-given priorities laid out in Scripture (1 Corinthians 6:12; 9:24; 2 Timothy 2:5; Matthew 6:33).

AS GOD'S PEOPLE OUR PRIORITIES SHOULD BE:

To love the Lord our God with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength (Mark 12:30).

To pursue and practice Christ-likeness (Philippians 1:21; 1 John 2:28-29).

To evangelize the lost (Acts 1:8; Matthew 28:19-20; Luke 24:46-48).

To use our spiritual gift(s) as a part of a local body of believers (Ephesians 4:7-16; 1 Corinthians 12:12-31; Romans 12:3-8).

To fellowship with, build up and disciple other believers (1 John 1:7; 1 Thessalonians 5:11; Matthew 28:19-20).

To have the earthly relationships that God intends (parent, child, spouse, friend, employee, employer, etc.).

To know, understand and apply God's Word (Psalm 119:11; 2 Timothy 2:15, 3:16-17).

While it is true that God is sovereign over all things, winning and losing is man's way of measuring success. Even though there is nothing wrong with striving to win, God's ultimate concern and desire is that we display exemplary character as participants, coaches, officials and fans (Psalm 139:1-6; James 4:6, Galatians 5:16-26).

In his excellent book, *They Call Me Coach*, legendary UCLA basketball coach John Wooden summarizes the right perspective that we all need:

"I always tried to make it clear that basketball is not the ultimate. It is of small importance in comparison to the total life we live. There is only one kind of a life that truly succeeds, and that is the one that places faith in the hands of the Savior. Until that is done, we are on an aimless course that runs in circles and goes nowhere. Material possessions, winning scores, and

great reputations are meaningless in the eyes of the Lord, because He knows what we really are and what we really can be, and that is all that really matters."¹⁴

With that right perspective, sports can be a wonderful source of exercise, enjoyment and even employment for the committed follower of Christ. Yet as with every good thing, sinful pursuits will negatively impact all that they touch. May we all pause and consider our involvement and interaction with sports through the lens of Scripture. The bottom line is, while the world is fanatically obsessed with sports, we as God's people are to be passionately and singularly obsessed with God.

End Notes:

- 1 <http://www.nisr.org/top/crisis.html>
- 2 <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article?tocid=9379351>
- 3 <http://www.nisr.org/top/crisis.html>
- 4 Dave Dravecky, *Comeback*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, & San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990) p. 249.
- 5 Rick Reilly, "Let Us Play," *Sports Illustrated*, 26 April 2004, p. 172.
- 6 http://www.knightcommission.org/about/a_call_to_action_ten_years_later/
- 7 Rick Reilly, "Let Us Play," *Sports Illustrated*, 26 April 2004, p. 172.
- 8 <http://www.aap.org/obesity/summary.htm>
- 9 <http://www.nisr.org/top/crisis.html>
- 10 Fantasy Sports Leagues (FSL), which are generally administered through the internet for a fee, are fictitious teams "managed" and/or "owned" by the participant. The "owner" drafts or purchases his professional players and manages the team throughout the season. FSL winners are determined by the records and statistics of the players on the various "owner's" teams.
- 11 Victor Lee, *Lee'd Story*, *Sports Spectrum*, May-June 2006, P. 8.
- 12 http://randolphfree.org/sports_-_a_biblical_perspective.htm
- 13 <http://www.reformed.org/documents/WSC.html>
- 14 John Wooden, *They Call Me Coach*, (Ventura, CA: Regal Books from Gospel Light, 2003) Day 60.

Dave Cunningham is an IFCA International member and Associate Pastor of Southern View Chapel in Springfield, IL.