



Common Ground?: Sport and the Church

David Oakley highlights the central place of sport in the world. He presents sociological arguments as to why Christians should critically embrace the appeal of sport and argues that churches have real possibilities through sport to rediscover their role within the community.



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Introduction

Few modern phenomena elicit such intense emotional bonding as sport. It often dominates the media and it would be almost impossible to overestimate the impact of sport in modern society. Other things such as art, science, agriculture and business may make larger contributions to civilisation but rarely do these other enterprises enter into daily discussion and lay claim to basic loyalties, passions and emotions in the way sport does. One striking development in sport around the world in recent years has been the increased visible engagement of Christians (evangelicals in particular) and churches both in participating and being vocal about their faith. Whilst this is not a recent phenomenon the question of how should the appeal of sport be handled by the church is brought into focus with the all-consuming Olympic Games and Paralympics coming to the UK in the summer of 2012.

The aim of this article is to highlight the special place sport has in our world today and thus present some sociological arguments as to why Christians could and should embrace the appeal of sport (but, of course, not uncritically). In this respect whilst considering the sociological arguments for embracing the appeal of sport, the author believes there is a greater value in not doing so in isolation from God's broader biblical mandate on mission.

What is Sport?

Few activities have secured a more central place in the culture of many countries than sport. Sport appeals

to its participants for entertainment, dreams to be fulfilled, self-esteem, identity, self-worth, fun, friendship, health and for economic reasons in the modern world and increasingly in the developing world but, actually, what is sport?

Sport to one degree or another embodies an irreducible element of 'play' which has no real or obvious intrinsic purpose yet there is a sense enjoyment that is to be experienced in playing or in watching others play that is part of the appeal of sport for many people. This has been true historically as ancient cultures displayed various forms of play and competition; therefore sport could be seen as an institutionalised (in varied degrees) manifestation of play. Play is fun and seems to come naturally and therefore it could well be argued from a Christian perspective, that play can be seen as a gift from a creator God. Whether this is believed to be true or not, there does seem to be a natural inclination to participate in play regardless of whether a person would or would not call themselves a Christian.

In considering the question of whether to embrace the appeal of sport, the emphasis here will primarily be on competitive physical games, i.e. there is an element of contest as the rules of the sport are standardised, enforced by official regulation, technical aspects of the game are taken seriously and the learning of the game skills become formalised.¹ Other forms of physical education/exertion and play do not require the same intentionality for Christian engagement as they are generally accepted as part of a healthy, wholesome life regardless of background or belief.

A historical perspective on Christian attitudes to sport

To understand the social phenomenon of sport and the potential 'pull' on Christians today, it is helpful to consider how Christians have or have not embraced sport in the past; hence a brief selective historical summary of Christian involvement is now outlined.

It is not known what the early Church thought about sport but the apostle Paul used sport as an effective way to illustrate biblical principles (e.g. 1 Cor 9.24–27). Thus there is an assumption that Paul's audience was familiar with sport because of mass popular appeal. The Bible does not condemn nor is there anything negative suggested in early Christian tradition towards sport as such. Increasingly, however, under Roman rule through to the 'Middle Ages' sport became more violent and therefore it would have been problematic for churches to embrace any mass appeal of sporting activity.

From about 1820 aristocracy sports expanded and the first organised games took place in England in 1849 resulting in the flourishing of sport in British and America schools. New games were invented (some by Christians, e.g. basketball) and there was a gradual exporting of games to the lower classes throughout the nineteenth century in the hope of producing respectability in the participants. For many participants, sport would have been a welcome distraction from the drudgery and pain of long hours of labour and poverty that would have been prevalent at this time for the working class.

In the 1870's the majority of English football clubs were sponsored by churches.² By 1900 the vast majority of teams in Liverpool originated from church organisations and the core of the newly formed football league were sponsored by socio-religious bodies, including clubs such as Bolton, Wolverhampton and Swindon. The Boy Scout movement and the YMCA played a role in developing an ideology labelled as 'muscular Christianity'³ which believed that through sport Christian character (i.e. morality and manliness) could be built into young boys.⁴ The Olympic Games movement had strong ideological links with Muscular Christianity highlighted by Pierre de Coubertin's address to the members of the International Olympic committee in London by stating 'the importance ... is not so much to win as to take part ... The important thing in life is not the triumph but the struggle.'⁵ The movement believed that the positive influence of sport could be transferred to other areas of life.

However, Christian attitudes towards sport changed during the early part of the twentieth century. Sporting organisations grew with various forms of business patronage, dramatic increase in crowd sizes, media interest, transportation development, commercialism, gambling and professionalism meant that 'stars' emerged as the innocence of sport was changed. Modern themes of sport, e.g. professionalism, sporting

icons, commercialisation, bureaucracy, nationalism, mass spectatorship and media coverage found roots in the late 1930's. The resulting commercialisation of sport led to an increasing influence and interaction with the economy. During this crucial development time, churches generally disengaged with the sport culture as fundamentalist attitudes within the Church resisted involvement in such a cultural climate. The Christian origins of many games did not survive this time of development as a parting of the ways seemed inevitable as the spirit of play was forced out to accommodate business.

During the 1950s in the USA, Christianity and sport started to re-engage because the mass appeal sport meant that crowds could be attracted for gospel mission events. Christian involvement in sport has now evolved into a multilayer movement that is poised to impact the twenty-first century. The sports culture that the Church now tries to engage with has changed dramatically since the Church last really embraced sport in the nineteenth

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century. There has been an increase in achievement behaviour, marketing, financial turnover, careers, societal influence, mass media and shift to the periphery of non-economic factors such as values. In top-level sport, professionalism and commercialisation have become the major characteristics, which seemingly push aside any notions of play. Morality has become confused with money values and 'winning at all costs' seems to have replaced 'sporting spirit'; it is in this contextual environment that the appeal of sport needs to be reexamined.

What is so special about sport?⁶

It is recognised that there are many good and worthwhile activities, e.g. art, music, drama, business, medical professions, etc., that people can participate in. However, why should sport be seen as different, special or even unique compared to the examples of many other worthwhile claims and activities on human participation and affection? Hopefully, the following give some insights on this:

(a) *Sport can be seen as a universal language:* Sport is an anthropological universal as it is found in some form in every culture and society. Sport can transcend economic, race, social, political, language and religious barriers thus promoting inter-culture dialogue, strengthened interaction and enhanced cooperation. Sport is played everywhere and increasingly being recognised as a language of movement by governments and world organisations. Sport to one degree or another seems to enjoy universal appeal. Just in one sport alone, football, the English Premier League

Notes

1. JJ Coakley, *Sport in Society: Issues and Controversies* (5th edn; St Louis: Mosby, 1994), pp. 15–16.

2. J Coleman, 'Sport and the Contradictions of Society', *International Journal for Theology* 5.205: (1985), pp. 21–31 provides a helpful summary of Christian engagement with sport historically both in USA and UK.

3. 'Muscular Christianity' was named by JJ Rousseau in the nineteenth century and acted as a summary of a Christian ethical approach to sport. See S Weir, *What the book says about Sport* (Oxford: Bible Reading Fellowship, 2000), p. 27.

4. L McCown & VJ Gin, *Focus on Sport in Ministry* (Marietta: 360 Sports, 2003), p. 115.5.

5. NJ Watson, S Weir & S Friend, 'Muscular Christianity and

has coverage available in 199 territories, reaching 586 million homes around the world.⁷ Sporting experiences around the world seem to lead to the breaking down of cultural barriers and connections are made through participating in sport, hence its appeal.

(b) Sport can be seen as relevant to contemporary culture: Sport permeates all levels of contemporary society as it fulfils a number of functions, e.g. leisure-time activity, achievement, health, mode of self-display/performance or for a social gathering. In the West, the leisure culture is increasingly dominating economic activity and time. The emergence of a leisure ethic out of a work ethic is an alternative that is being chosen by many in contemporary society.⁸ The

Stuart Weir notes that, 'Paul used the experience of the sportsman to motivate his readers to commitment to a higher cause ... Paul and other New Testament writers recognized sport as an integral part of the society of their day and therefore saw it as an obvious source of imagery in describing the Christian faith.'⁹ This approach is increasingly being adopted by non-faith groups as the power of the communication medium is used to teach life-skills through experiential learning programmes run by many sporting clubs, government, education, private and public sectors.

(e) Sport can be seen as an International Social Phenomenon: Sport is now a social phenomenon; an intricate part of people's lives as it is connected to major spheres of social life such as family, education and religion. It can have the power to divide a city or unite a nation, realise dreams or break hearts. Though only one sport, football has a massive following; it is the national sport in most countries and is followed in all countries. The 208 member countries contain over 265 million male and female players in addition to five million referees and officials. The 2006 FIFA World Cup Final attracted more than 600 million people tuning in to watch at least part of the match.¹⁰ The sporting family is ambitious to be perceived as a responsible industry that makes a positive contribution that its local communities, one that goes beyond the sporting entertainment it provides.

(f) Sport can be seen as a fun, healthy and holistic activity: Sport can lead to friendships as relationships seem to come easy when something as powerful as sport holds people together. It is special in that it does have a 'feel good' factor and very few activities claim to offer as much excitement and unpredictable drama as sport does. Therefore participation can be viewed as part of a healthy, wholesome and balanced life.

Conclusion

In view of this massive cultural package that is sport, the Church and Christians do have a potential opportunity to make a significant impact in the sports culture and the wider world through participation and effective engagement. Some of the six reasons mentioned individually might be sufficient to encourage a Christian participant in sport but when considered as a whole, the social reasons for special intentional church engagement seem compelling. Whilst this may be a compelling motive to establish common ground between sport and the Church, further thought and understanding of what is the sports culture (with all its flaws as well as positives) is still needed before this engagement can be effective. The appeal of sport as a bridge and as a common language is a real draw for people all over the world and since there is the potential to communicate truth as well through this medium, churches have real possibilities to rediscover their role within the sport culture and community.

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European Sports Conference Charter describes sport as an inalienable right of each person; therefore it can be a very powerful social tool through its inclusivity, person-centred focus and capacity to mobilise people. The growth, variety and diversity of people attracted to sport reflect the powerful 'pull' of sport.

(c) Sport can be seen as a microcosm of life: Sport often reflects the culture in which it is played, hence lessons learnt from sport could be transferred to wider society and back again. The environment of sport can help reveal and shape character, be a place of instruction in glory and disappointment as sport covers many of the emotions and drama found in the collective and individual challenges of life. Priceless, foundational skills can be attained through the sports experience especially amongst children thus sport can provide an environment for whole-life values training. Community sport educational initiatives have a proven track record of success in heightening self-esteem, motivation, focus among young people and in driving literacy, numeracy and the popularity of vocational training. Additionally, sport can play its role in helping to make a contribution on the issues of health, education and social inclusion. These educational initiatives through sport delivered all around the world in different cultural settings are making the appeal of sport stronger as so much good seems to be emerging from them.

(d) Sport can be seen as a medium or vehicle to communicate a message: Sport is an effective communication channel as a multidimensional, catalyst to compliment or create opportunities for other activities. The Apostle Paul recognised these qualities of sport and used it to communicate examples of spiritual disciplines that are highlighted in the sporting world. He could see parallels between Christianity and sport that meant Christians could take lessons from sporting life and apply them to the Christian lifestyle.

Beyond', *Journal of Religion and Society* (2005), p. 17.

6. Lecture framework notes from International Sports Leadership School, Stellenbosch, South Africa, 2000.

7. www.thefa.com

8. J Garner (ed.), *Recreation and Sports Ministry: Impacting Post-modern Culture* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003), pp. 4–5, identifies a Gallop poll that recorded 90% of Americans watch, read or participate in sports once a month and 70% once a week.

9. Weir, *Sport*, pp. 16–17.

10. www.thefa.com