



Leadership and virtue in sport



Paul Bickley

Paul Bickley is the Director of Political Programme at Theos. He is author of *Coming off the Bench and Building Jerusalem? Christianity and the Labour Party*.

Introduction

Of all the trust-destroying institutional crises we have seen in recent years, those that have affected the institutions of sport have been among the most disenchanting. Not many people love investment bankers, we expect very little from tabloid journalists and European Union officials do not occupy a place close to most people's hearts. When, by sins of commission or omission, individuals or institutions in these fields drastically fail to meet public expectations, or even break the law, then we may be angry, but we're rarely disappointed.

But there's no disappointment more crushing than learning that an accomplished and revered athlete has compromised him- or herself. As much as we'd like our elite sportsmen and women to meet the person specification for the job of 'role model', hardly a day passes without a new on-pitch controversy or personal indiscretion hitting the back pages, giving the lie to the ancient but enduring belief that there is a correlation between physical prowess and moral achievement.¹ As the journalist Simon Barnes puts it, sportsmen are the naughty vicars of the twenty-first century – respected representatives caught dipping into the collection box, supping the communion wine, and so on. The same goes for the institutions that we think ought to carry treasured sporting traditions, yet are beset by corruption and crises of leadership. When it comes to sport, we love more dearly, we expect more, and then when there are failings we suffer a personal sense of dismay.

We also carry an intuition that sport is a field in which we are trained in noble virtues. This idea has a long history, with roots in the ancient Greek concept of

kalokagathia (the unity of nobility in appearance and in conduct) but you could identify a similar notion undergirding chivalric virtues in the middle ages, or the nineteenth century *Turnen* gymnasium movement in Germany. It also resonates with the idea of 'muscular Christianity', advanced by the Victorian clergyman and author Charles Kingsley in Britain. He disliked the phrase (and indeed it sounds particularly unusual to modern ears; muscular here doesn't mean 'aggressive' but 'physical'), but for Kingsley, sport could give young men (and it usually was young men) 'not merely daring and endurance, but, better still, temper, self-restraint, fairness, honour, unenvious approbation of another's success, and all that 'give and take' of life which stand a man in good stead when he goes forth into the world, and without which, indeed, his success is always maimed and partial.'²

In Britain, these ideas spread through educators like Thomas Arnold, then through clergymen (who often helped establish some of the football clubs with which we are familiar to this day), and then through institutions like the YMCA and the Scouts. Through Pierre de Coubertin, it entered into mythology of the modern Olympics, and so continues to have a sustained impact on the Western view of the relationship between sport, physical fitness and goodness.

The clutch of recent stories around player or administrator corruption and misbehaviour give the impression that there is something going drastically and systematically wrong in the world of sport – temper, self-restraint, fairness? When did you last see these virtues in a sportsman or sportswoman? Of course, they're far from

absent, but particularly in elite sport, it seems they're harder to exercise than ever.

Whatever has changed the game on the pitch has also changed the game off the pitch – in the boardrooms, the manager's office, the stands and the governing institutions. The FIFA corruption scandal is only the most recent of a long string of examples. It was not so long ago that the International Olympic Committee itself was struggling to get to grips with its own kleptocratic culture, or when elite cycling was blighted with allegations of endemic doping. FIFA's bribe culture has been a semi-open secret since 2006; the recent arrests and indictments are simply the early fruits of the first proper criminal investigation.

In short, if sport was ever some kind of morality machine, then something seems to have broken.

What is sport?

To begin to understand some of these issues, we must reflect on what sport is and what it isn't.

Whenever 'sport' is written about or discussed, problems of definition arise. Do sports have to be competitive? Do they have to be physical? We might think that there are obvious answers to these questions, but every obvious answer is undermined by exceptions and caveats. Climbing is extraordinary physically demanding, but it is not competitive. Chess is extremely competitive, but almost non-physical.

We need not resolve this perennial pub conundrum here. The point, rather, is that what usually comes to mind when we think of sport is a particular stage in the development of some aspects of this part of human culture. Historically speaking, it is very recent. The first football league was established in England in 1888, the first Test Match was played in Melbourne in 1877 and basketball wasn't even invented until 1891.

Of course, people have played different games for thousands of years, but sport as we know it now is synthesis of those games and the economic, social and technological developments of the era of global communication. There is a profound similarity between what is happening on the pitch in a World Cup final and what's happening in the local park on a Sunday morning, but they're not the same, and not just because the players on the pitch in the World Cup final are better. In all sorts of ways, the meaning of and our engagement with the two are radically different. The sport which is played so that people can watch it is different from the sport that we actually play; as different as cooking is from watching a cookery programme, as learning to play the piano is from plugging in your headphones and pressing play.

Sport is now far less a thing that we do, and far more something that we watch other people do on screens of various kinds. If sport as we know it is an invention, roughly speaking, of the last 200 years, it has experienced a metamorphosis over the last 50 years, which has placed it at the very heart of the

global entertainment industry, and as such one of the 'commodities' which is being exported across the planet.

The point is that elite sport is now often a tool – leverage to achieve some other goal. "We have the long-term rights in most countries to major sporting events," Rupert Murdoch told News Corp shareholders in 1996.

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"We intend to ... use sports as a battering ram ... in all our pay-TV operations."³ Murdoch wasn't paying for the privilege of broadcasting sports, he was buying the bait which would attract more and more customers.

This is not without benefits. The money that has flowed into the top layer of English football has, for example, seen improvements in major stadium facilities. Yet it has changed how key decision makers think about sport, and those birds are coming home to roost. Much of what goes wrong happens under cover of the language of 'markets' and 'business'. Jack Warner, one of the members of FIFA's executive committee who is now squarely in the frame, is reported to have said of colleagues who would not accept bribes, 'There are some people here who think they are "more pious than thou" If you're pious, open a church, friends. Our business is our business.'

No longer for its own sake

These developments have created a crisis in sport not, as if we were developing a watered-down Marxist critique, because there's 'too much money' in sport. Very clearly, that is not always the case – many elite athletes live financially precarious lives, and many sport clubs, including some of those playing at the highest levels, are far from profit-making. No – the trope that 'sport is big business' is one example of a flaw in our conception of sport which creates the conditions where all kinds of cheating, misbehaviour and corruption flourish. To understand the issue in full, we need to think again about the essence of sport – not as it is but as it should be.

On an explanatory level, the idea of play as the essence of sport is compelling. In his seminal book on the subject, *Homo Ludens*, Johan Huizinga argued that, first and foremost, play requires a stepping out of ordinary life into specific spaces and specific times where different rules apply, that it is ordered – it requires rules, which if persistently broken mean that play will no longer be taking place and that it tends to the creation of 'play communities' – clubs of players, spectators and so on.⁴ Most importantly, however, play is 'never imposed by physical necessity or moral duty. It is never a task. It is done at leisure, during "free time"'.⁵ It offers, therefore, a kind of transcendence: 'In play there is something "at play" which transcends the immediate needs of life and imparts meaning to the action.'⁶ Since it is not done 'for' anything, play is a concrete expression of freedom.

NOTES

1. The Greek concept of *arête* – excellence – dominated thinking about sporting ability and ethics, but this is not simply a trope of ancient Greece. In the Gospel of John, when Jesus and his disciples encounter a blind man, the disciples ask 'who has sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind' (Jn 9.1). Jesus' answer was neither.

2. Quoted in B Haley, *The Healthy Body and Victorian Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), p. 119.

3. Quoted in T de Lisle, 'How did sport get so big?' *Intelligent Life*, Summer 2010, available online at <http://moreintelligentlife.co.uk/print/content/ideas/tim-de-lisle/how-did-sport-get-so-big>

4. J Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955).

5. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 1.

7. Play in our society of compulsion and work oftentimes does little more than provide a quality of suspension, temporarily unburden us, or assist political stabilisation, work

Play is not only expressed through sport, but the idea has been the basis for both the appreciation and compelling critique of sport in its modern guise. For Hugo Rahner, God is the 'ultimate player'. For Jürgen Moltmann, in creation and incarnation God was playful while we – homo faber, man the worker – experience a degree of alienation in our attempts to play.⁷ Similarly, Robert K Johnston agrees that modern commercialised sport has lost its playfulness, and thus its sacred roots. And play lies at the centre of Michael Novak's thesis in *The Joy of Sports*, where sport has been 'raised to such a pitch of technical organisation and scientific thoroughness that the real play-spirit is threatened with

elite sport suffers from a fateful over-seriousness and a necessity, which leeches the playfulness from the games we play

morality, and social regimentation. Quoted in RK Johnston, *The Christian at Play* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997). <http://www.religion-online.org/showchapter.asp?title=3366&C=2760>

8. This paragraph relies on NJ Watson and A Parker's (eds) introductory essay 'Mapping the Field' in *Sports and Christianity: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 16.

9. L Harvey, *A Brief Theology of Sport* (London: SCM, 2014).

extinction'.⁸ Most recently, for Lincoln Harvey, sport represents 'a liturgical celebration of our creaturely contingency'.⁹ Play is 'autotelic' (for itself alone) because when we play we are being ourselves as much as we can be: to be human is to be unnecessary, called into being by nothing but our creator's love.

Sport can be easily corrupted by being made necessary. In our environment, the intrusion of the market is the primary cause of ludic diffusion, but there are many others. Sport has become 'important' for sustaining local or national reputation, for peacemaking, for community development, necessary for fitness and public health, necessary even for the economy, and even for evangelism. Whether sport is an effective means of reaching these objectives is debatable (witness, for instance, the lack of an 'Olympic bounce' in sporting participation rates). The point, however, is that necessity is corrosive to play, such that much of what passes now for sport has little play within it – no longer one of Berger's five 'signals of transcendence', now another piece of cursed dirt.

When interviewing elite sportspeople for research for Christians in Sport and Bible Society, it became clear to me that this is not just a theoretical or philosophical complaint. The life of many elite athletes is one of anxiety, though they recognise that other would be envious of their position. As one former Premier League footballer put it to me, 'Your focus changes because you recognise it's not just playing football, but you realise you can play football and make money.' It is the difference between living 'for' or 'off' the sport you once loved. High levels of competition, high levels of scrutiny, the risk of injury (and thus the loss of earnings) and the difficulty of forming strong relationships (the question 'what does this person want from me' is often at the forefront of players' mind), even knowing how to use large amounts of spare time, are among the pastoral challenges peculiar to elite sport. That anxiety is precisely a product of the seriousness of sport.

What is to be done?

Sport – at least elite sport – suffers from a fateful over-seriousness and a necessity, which leeches the playfulness from the games we play. This over-seriousness is often somewhere in the picture when sport goes bad, whether we talking about institutional corruption or individuals players, or even rampant fan misbehaviour.

There is no simple solution – no easy way, for instance, to untangle the elite sport from the global entertainment industry with which it has now effectively hybridised. Governance bodies like FIFA will have to be embarrassed, harassed and prosecuted until they are prepared to put their houses in order.

If we have correctly diagnosed the malaise of contemporary sport, we need to be careful that we identify the right prescription – and it can't simply be moralism, the demand that players or governance institutions should just do better. Given the theological emphasis on the play ethic in most contemporary theological engagement, a resort to moralism is theologically incoherent, as well as being unattractive. The outcome of the gospel, interacting authentically with a particular aspect of human culture should be a more expansive life, rest and the lifting of burdens (Mt 11.30; Jn 10.10). If the Christian witness in the world of sport is to advocate for and enforce behavioural norms, or better regulation, perhaps through codes of practice (probably a futile endeavour, in any case), then it is very much distorted. If such codes have a role, it is not to encourage the expression of virtue but to suppress possible vice.

What we need to see is a huge transfer of emphasis, resources and attention away from the elite level, and toward ensuring that ordinary people have the appropriate opportunities and facilities to enjoy sport. What part might the church play? Here are two ideas.

First, as Christian individuals, we need to transfer our love of sport from endlessly spectatorship of elite sport into participation. For sport to be playful, it needs to be played – ironic, then, that just at the moment when many feel they can't escape from sport that participation rates are falling. What could churches do to see people playing more sport? Could they open their green spaces to the public, installing sport equipment? Could they make better use of other facilities, such as church halls? Could they be encouraged to establish mid-week sport groups, seeing this as legitimate part of discipleship?

Second, as churches, we can in our own small ways instrumentalise sport, making it a means to an end. Major tournaments are often accompanied by para-church campaigns, using them as a pretext for evangelism. Worse than this, individual Christian athletes are used as pet celebrities, with no regard for the discipleship or pastoral implications. Agencies like Sport Chaplains UK demonstrate that the ministry within sport can and should be more focused on athletes as human beings, not as sporting celebrities. Sport chaplains have a potentially transformative impact on clubs not because they see sporting performance or 'success' as entirely irrelevant – they have broken the cycle of over-seriousness.