

# Would Jesus Wear Face Paint?

BY GEOFF BOWDEN

**Being a fan captivates our imaginations, brings us great joy, and partly constitutes our identities. The satisfaction of victory is intoxicating and the camaraderie with other fans in defeat is ennobling. But are there moral limits to the exuberance of fandom?**

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I grew up loving sports. My parents encouraged me to play football, basketball, and baseball, and only rarely did they miss an opportunity to watch me. I played year-round—never missing a season, and never hearing a complaint from mom and dad. At the time they seemed to enjoy sports and my success as much as I did. Yet looking back on my childhood now, I realize their real concern in these activities was for me; otherwise they had only a passing interest in sports.

The one sport that proved the exception, that quietly occupied them through a television broadcast here and a radio broadcast there, was stockcar racing. We lived in the South, after all! They never pushed the sport on me, and I never asked them when the next race was. I was committed to the “big three” sports that I played. Besides, I did not want to be saddled with any of the cultural baggage I associated with stockcar racing fans: most of them, it seemed to me, were shirtless and sunburned, with dirt on their faces, holding a beer can, and displaying a smile with a few missing teeth. No thanks.

When I went away for a college education, I left my athletic career behind. I was “burned out” by twelve years of non-stop athletic activity. I played some intramural sports during those years and followed my college football team, but I did not watch a single baseball game, professional or otherwise.

My relationship with my parents underwent significant changes as well.

Being an only-child, family life had essentially revolved around me, and because I played sports all of the time, our relationship was consumed with sports-talk. When I went to college, all of that changed. After my college's football team played each week, I would call mom and dad to ask what they thought about the game. "Didn't see it," was their response in those first few weeks. "Oh," I replied, not sure what to talk about next. In what came as a gigantic shock to me, for the first time in my life I did not know how to talk to my parents. Our conversations became awkward and short.

In my absence, my parents began to recover a life they had once known without me. With friends who were not my teammates' parents, they took outings to places that were not ballparks. "Who are these people?" I wondered. As the semester went on, mom and I made the transition to a post-sporting relationship. She would ask about life at college with my new friends, and would keep me up-to-date about the family and how all of my high school friends were doing. But dad was a different story. He and I would sit with phones to our ears for minutes at a time in silence, wondering what to talk about. He seemed uninterested in my college life. I had no idea what he liked, and so I had no "in" with him.

The next February came around and one of my roommates, with a lot fewer hang-ups about being stereotyped as a southerner, invited me to watch the Daytona 500 with him. Desperate for something to do besides study, I agreed to watch the famous race on television from green flag to checkered flag. About halfway through the race, in one of those rare moments when God's voice speaks clearly, I decided to call my dad. We talked for at least thirty minutes as he explained the nuances of bump drafting, restrictor plates, camber, the slingshot move, and the elusive phrase "rubbin' is racin'." I became genuinely interested in stockcar racing for the first time in my life. After a week or two of lively conversations with dad, it occurred to me that I had found an "in" with him.

Dad and I talk about a lot more these days; but when we cannot figure out where to begin, we always discuss the last race. Being fans has helped reinvigorate a relationship that had lost its way.

Being a sports fan, then, can be a very good thing in life. The joys of fandom may lead us toward more important goods—as my enjoying stockcar racing has led to a deeper relationship with my father. It is this connection with other higher goods that establishes many of the moral boundaries for fandom: whenever our actions as sports fans become destructive to those higher goods to which being a fan can contribute, something has gone morally wrong. But before we explore the moral implications of this instrumental connection with higher goods in the third section below, let me reiterate that being a sports fan is intrinsically good, that it is valuable in itself. To think otherwise would be to deny the obvious! The reason being a sports fan is such a powerful way to connect with other people is that sports are a load of fun to watch, especially if one is emotionally invested in a team. We

are fans because we love play, we love competition, and we love to win, and these joys are valuable in themselves.<sup>1</sup>

### **LOYALTY AND IDENTITY**

There is another reason that being a sports fan is morally significant: being a fan can be a powerful part of our identity. Fans of a particular professional or college team often identify with its local culture, even if they are not from that city or state. They become more and more ensconced in the social, political, and economic contours of a place as they identify with the local team. How could a person be a fan of the Pittsburgh Steelers and not at least sympathize with the plight of the local steelworkers? Does it seem possible to cheer for the Milwaukee Brewers and not, at a minimum, question one's stance as a teetotaler? Can a die-hard New York Yankees fan ever be at ease in Beantown, the home of their nemesis Boston Red Sox? Not likely. Of course, as the cities and regions of the country are becoming increasingly similar and generic, there is less and less local color to identify with. Nevertheless, the remaining peculiarities of places and cultures are heightened in the world of the sports fan. Along with being a fan of a particular team come a host of other identities that inform our moral identity. So, being a sports fan is not simply something we do; it is (partially) who we are.<sup>2</sup>

Yet as Christians, all of our local identities should be subordinated to one moral identity – being a disciple of Christ. All of our specific loyalties, including those to sports teams, must be properly ordered so that loyalty to God and commitment to following God's will for our lives takes priority.<sup>3</sup> In the Gospels, Jesus subordinates local identities to one highest loyalty. For instance, in Nazareth, the people scoff at the thought that this young man who grew up in their village could perform miracles and constitute the incoming of God's kingdom for Israel. Recognizing the tension that exists between his local community identity and his higher moral calling, Jesus wryly observes, "Only in his hometown and in his own house is a prophet without honor" (Matthew 13:57, NIV).<sup>4</sup> Even the great good of commitment to his biological family must take a back-seat to doing the Father's will:

While Jesus was still talking to the crowd, his mother and brothers stood outside, wanting to speak to him. Someone told him, "Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you." He replied to him, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" Pointing to his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother." (Matthew 12:46-50, NIV)

Is Jesus saying that we should no longer consider our local identities, and especially our biological family relationships, as important or special in any way? Absolutely not! Jesus is redefining who the true nation of Israel is, contending that being of the genetic lineage of Abraham will no longer suf-

fice to make one a “brother.” Rather, the most important variable of our identity is whether or not we do the will of God. God’s claim on our lives takes precedence over the claims of family.<sup>5</sup> Certainly, God wants us to care for our particular communities and our families, and we should never despise or mistreat them because of differing religious commitments or different positions on ethical matters. But the implications of Jesus’ redefinition of what it means to be a member of Israel are clear: what matters to God should be our biggest concern.

### THE HIERARCHY OF GOODS

So what place does our loyalty to a sports team take within the hierarchy of goods? We have already seen that loyalty to a sports team can be a good thing indeed. Competitions, comradeship with fellow fans, and developing our ability to appreciate athletic excellence all have the capacity to enhance human character. In addition to these, being a sports fan is a lot of fun. Anticipating the big game, strategizing with other fans before the game, watching our team play well under pressure, experiencing the sense of unity with all of the team’s fans, celebrating after their wins, and even debriefing or complaining after their losses can be a blast. It is my experience that being a fully committed fan of a team in a partisan, competitive atmosphere is a lot more fun than being lukewarm or relatively uncommitted. Games are much more fun when you are fully invested in the outcome. But is there a moral line that Christians should not cross?

Our highest good in this present life of discipleship has been variously described in theologically sophisticated ways – e.g., as being fully devoted to God’s ways, participating in a right relationship with God, or becoming Christ-like in all our activities. But for the purposes of evaluating our actions as sports fans, can we be a bit more specific? What does it mean to be “the light of the world” or “a city built on a hill” (Matthew 5:14) when we are sitting in the grandstands?

We are to model God’s love, first and foremost, for *others*. Character formation in Christian communities should nurture the impulse to put the needs of others before our own concerns, to serve the neighbor *and the enemy*. Reciting an early Christian hymn, the Apostle Paul says that Jesus, in order to love others fully, “emptied himself, taking the form of a slave” (Philippians 2:7a). Becoming Christ-like means taking the form of a slave, or servant.

Second, a missional Church proclaims the good news that God is once again king over his people, that the kingdom of God is at hand, and now all

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are called to submit to the rule of God, not just Jew, but also Gentile. Our basic calling as Christians is to convey this message in both deed and word to all whom we encounter.

Finally, and this is organically related to the second point, we must not act or speak in any fashion that places obstacles for others to hear the good news. If we preach service, but only consume, we have muted the good

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**Jesus does not prep us to dominate opponents, but to help others survive. So, how can we be ardent sports fans and his disciples at the same time?**

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news. If we preach justice, but ignore the maimed and oppressed, people will not see the rule of God operate in our lives.

Okay, now we have a problem: even the most die-hard fan will sense that this Christian understanding of our highest good is in serious

tension with competition, the very essence of sports. Sporting events are supposed to create winners and losers, but how does this jive with us serving our enemies? Is this not justice on the gridiron: the home-team player knocks an opponent flat on his back and the fans cheer as it happens?

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus does not prep us to be successful in a competitive environment, to win at all costs, to dominate opponents. The opposite is true: he teaches us how to help others survive. So, can we even be ardent sports fans and Christians at the same time?

## **SPORTS AS THEATER**

I think we can conceptualize athletic competition in a way that is compatible with being like Christ, and it is not altogether foreign to the manner in which sports are perceived in our culture today. Sports are theatrical dramas, and athletes, coaches, and fans play roles within those dramas. In much the same way that patrons go to the theater to see a play, sports fans go to competitions to see players assume roles, act within the confines of a given set of rules, and engage in dramatic conflict. While we may know the outcome of a theatrical play or opera (because we have read the script), in sporting events the outcome is always unknown, which greatly heightens the sense of drama.

Like the theatrical play, a sporting event is an “artificial” environment, a scenario created for the purpose of showcasing the particular skills of the players in a dramatic plot. In both cases we know that the players will emerge from the stage or arena to once again engage the “real world” and we expect, if all goes well, as they return to the normal course of life they should suffer no consequences as a result of their participation.<sup>6</sup> We no more think the defensive end who blindsides the opposing quarterback should be arrested for assault after the game than we expect the actor whose

character commits murder on stage should be tried for the crime in a real court of law.

Just as athletes play specific roles in sporting events, so do we as fans. Our role is to love our teams and players because of their performances on the field of play, and not (usually) for the ways in which they live the rest of their lives. We engage in the drama along with the players, and our passions should be restricted to the artificial confines of the competition itself. Our hostility toward the other team is contrived, a product of the artificial drama in which we engage.

Now we can see the point of this reconceptualization of athletics as theater. Outside the boundaries of the competition, our moral responsibilities to our opponents – the other team’s players or their fans – is to serve them in pursuit of the highest good. Inside the artificial drama, we do not suspend Christian ethics; rather, we clearly remember that the joy of the drama of competition is not the highest good, and must be subordinated to the highest good.

This explains why it is when injured players, for either team, show partial recovery as they leave the playing field, the true fans cheer. They should not want to win so badly that they hope for permanent injury to opposing players. It is true that managing injuries has become a part of the drama of competition itself, but, deep down, true fans do not want to see injuries on the field of play to have effects that permeate players’ lives off the field. When it comes to injuries and passions and hostile partisanship, what happens on the field should stay on the field. That is the moral nature of the theatrical dramas that are sports.

In another sense, sporting events (like other theatrical events) are a part of real life and our activities as fans are perfectly continuous with the ethics of Christian discipleship. Sports (like theater) are practices that athletes and fans engage in to cultivate the virtues. As fans we can engage in charity to the neighbor and enemy during a sporting event. We may develop courage when confronted with insurmountable odds, and learn to deal appropriately with a heartbreaking defeat. So, while the hostility and animosity generated among opposing fans at a sporting event should live and die with the event itself, the habits of character that they develop during a sporting event, like courage or charity or the ability to put loss in the larger perspective of hope, can transcend the boundaries of the event.

## **THE ROLE OF A FAN**

With this understanding of sports as a form of theater, let us return to the issue of how the intrinsic goods of being a sports fan – both the joys and the loyalties that it brings to us – can fit into a life of Christian discipleship. We have learned that the question is: How is the particular practice of being a fan of this sport and that team to be properly ordered under the higher Christian goods of love toward neighbor and enemy and service to the

dispossessed? For instance, good-natured competition and light-hearted ribbing of opposing fans and referees constitutes a moral practice that is healthy for us, but only if we keep it properly ordered within the larger hierarchy of human goods. When we begin to think being a fan is an activity that can be wholly separated from being Christian, we have crossed a line. No activities, relationships, or practices are outside the lordship of Christ.

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Our every activity should cultivate virtues that enhance our Christian moral lives, and none of our activities should undermine those higher goods of discipleship for ourselves, or others.

I add that our being a fan should not undermine *others'* discipleship because the advice of the Apostle

Paul regarding our responsibility for the "weaker" disciples applies in this situation as well. Though he agreed with the "stronger" Christians at Corinth that there is nothing inherently wrong with eating food sacrificed to idols, Paul worried that eating the food would be a problem for the younger Christians, causing them to lose their emerging faith. The freedom we possess in the Christian faith must be restrained by sensitivity to others' weakness, for in carelessly exercising our freedom we may inadvertently destroy the faith of others. "When you sin against your brothers in this way and wound their weak conscience," Paul warns, "you sin against Christ" (1 Corinthians 8:12, NIV). Isn't there a parallel to this in the ethics of fandom? We are free to cheer vigorously for our team at the game and let others know where our sporting allegiances lie, but when the opportunity arises to chide a referee or mock opposing players and fans (even if it is in the spirit of playful competition), we must beware of how others perceive our actions! Our highest moral obligation is to Christ and to the fulfillment of the ethics of his kingdom, and not loyalty to our team.

Being a fan captivates our imaginations and partly constitutes our identities. Our favorite athletes pull us to the edge of our seats as we watch them push the boundaries of physical and mental exertion. The satisfaction of victory is intoxicating, and the camaraderie with other fans even in defeat is ennobling. All this is very good, as long as it exists in a larger context of concern for the well-being of others.

Would Jesus attend a professional or college sports event? Would he wear face paint? I think he would. But he would also walk that extra mile to show opposing fans and athletes that the importance of victory pales in comparison to the riches of the kingdom of God.

So, let us cheer for our team as loud as we can, but let us end the game with a handshake and a gesture of charity, that while we have a serious commitment to our team, our commitment to Christ and those he loves, including enemy fans, reigns over all else.

## NOTES

1 While some intrinsically good things are much more valuable than others, all of them can contribute instrumentally to a “good life” overall. Ralph McNerny has an accessible discussion of the relationships among intrinsic and instrumental goods in chapter two of his *Ethica Thomistica*, revised edition (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1997).

2 Christopher Evans warns that the unreflective collective identity engendered by being a sports fan can contribute to a civil religion that supplants Christianity. See his “Baseball as Civil Religion: The Genesis of an American Creation Story” in Christopher H. Evans and William Herzog II, eds., *The Faith of Fifty Million: Baseball, Religion, and American Culture* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 13-33.

3 McNerny, *Ethica Thomistica*, 70-71.

4 Scripture quotations marked (NIV) are taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. NIV®. Copyright© 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

5 See N. T. Wright’s discussion of this passage in *Jesus and Victory of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 277-278.

6 Unfortunately, this is not always the case. Too often athletes are heckled, stalked, and otherwise poorly treated by their own disgruntled fans or by fans of opposing teams. But this bad behavior expresses a fundamentally wrong view of sports, which is at the heart of the moral issue I am trying to address.



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