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# Upward Sports

BY JORDAN COX

**Sports, recreation, and leisure programs like Upward Unlimited® invite people to be the Body of Christ in their community. Participants mature as disciples as they learn to live out their faith through sports competition on the field, court, gymnastics mat, or in the swimming pool.**

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**C**urly blond hair was his most notable physical characteristic at first glance. His knock on my open office door was rather faint, although his tone and manners were seemingly bold and confident. “May I have a moment of your time, please sir?” After being seated, this boy of nine or ten years said, “My name is Montana and I wanted to say ‘Thank You’ for allowing me to play Upward basketball on Saturday. It really meant a lot to me. The doctor just cleared me and I wasn’t sure I was going to get to play basketball this season.”

The boy’s unique first name and subsequent message had the hamster in my head turning the wheel quickly to recall a phone conversation a few days earlier with a mother desperately seeking a chance for her son to play youth basketball. The details came back rapidly because it was one of the few times in my ministry when I had not said exactly what I was thinking. After we’d spent thousands of dollars on television, radio, and newspaper advertisements, distributed brochures in every elementary school in the city, and even rented a billboard on the interstate highway, this woman was calling, seven weeks into a ten-week season, to see if she could register her son to play basketball in a league! She explained the doctor had just a day before cleared her son to play. Amateur Athletic Union (A.A.U.) leagues were closed and almost over, select-team programs did not have space for anyone this late in the season, and the city program was almost completed. I wondered to myself if the boy was a “hot-shot” all-star player who had broken an ankle or sprained a wrist, and a church program was his last option.

Nevertheless, I allowed him to practice that night and play on Saturday. Extra uniforms had been purchased for just such an occurrence.

Now on Monday morning, here was Montana – one of 855 children in a basketball program sponsored by three local churches to reach the community – seated in front of me, offering a word of gratitude. “See, the doctor just cleared me to play after this round of treatments,” he said. “The chemo makes me really sick and weak and I didn’t think I was going to get to play this year.” The lump in my throat felt about as big as a basketball. Tears were beginning to form. This third grader calmly continued, “I know the only reason God has allowed me to live this long is because he wants me to tell other kids about Jesus, and playing basketball is a great way for me to do it.”

### **THE UPWARD UNLIMITED® PLAN**

The not-for-profit organization Upward Unlimited® offers one of the most popular formats for church-based sports programs.<sup>1</sup> Children of ages five to twelve are the target audience for the company’s programs because current research indicates that nearly half (43%) of all Americans who accept Jesus Christ as their Savior do so before reaching the age of thirteen.<sup>2</sup> In a “family friendly” schedule of just one hour of practice and a single one-hour game on Saturdays for up to eight weeks, these Upward sports plans include a biblically based devotion during a five-minute break at the midpoint of a team’s practice. Players learn a verse from Scripture during this time as well. Each player is given a green star or sticker to represent “growth”; other colored stars that represent various character traits are awarded following every game, including a white star signifying “Christ-likeness.”

If sponsoring congregations do not have a gymnasium or athletic field to conduct these ministries, they may borrow or rent space from a local school or the community. Church members volunteer to serve as league commissioners, coaches and assistant coaches, referees, team parents, halftime speakers, and prayer partners. By encouraging involvement of congregations from many denominations and attracting participants from the entire community, including individuals who are not members of any church, Upward sports leagues open avenues to develop and deepen relationships across the community. At the conclusion of the season, every child receives the same postseason award in the festival atmosphere of a special rally for all participants, their families, and volunteers. The “awards night” ceremony provides a ready-made platform for presenting an invitation to respond to the gospel story.<sup>3</sup>

Combining sports programs with evangelistic efforts is not a new idea. “Churches are waking up to the realization that leisure is a new frontier to be claimed for the Lord,” Agnes Pylant, the first director of the Church Recreation department of the Baptist Sunday School Board of the Southern

Baptist Convention, observed half a century ago. "Never before have so many ministers and church members recognized the important place of recreation in the total program of the church."<sup>4</sup>

So, even though sports programs like the Upward leagues may not be "cutting edge" in their purpose, their cultural relevance today is sharp. Sports and leisure outreach programs are helping congregations realize Christ's great commission to be his "witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Because people simply love to play, these programs can unite members of different churches in ministries to see God change lives. Also, they can train young people to be witnesses through their sports activities. "They are trying to meet the needs of their student-athletes," one Presbyterian minister notes, "and helping young athletes see their sportsmanship as an opportunity to demonstrate Godly values."<sup>5</sup>

### **THE BRIDGE FROM SPORTS TO EVANGELISM**

Not only can sports and leisure programs build up the body of Christ through *koinonia*, or the congregation's internal life and fellowship, they are a ready-made bridge to the lost. "Some people will be reached for Christ because they will hear the gospel preached from the pulpit. Others will 'hear' the gospel because they see it lived out in the context of sports ministry or because the athlete uses the 'pulpit of competition' to declare Christ," notes Rodger Oswald, leader of Church Sports International. "The ministry potential of sports and recreation can be an effective tool for the church and a powerful vehicle for the gospel."<sup>6</sup> This is similar to the Apostle Paul adapting his ministry to reach the unconvinced: "To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some" (1 Corinthians 9:22).

Bill Hybels, the senior pastor of Willow Creek Community Church, relates a personal story that illustrates the point I am making. When he had just purchased a used sailboat

but "was pretty green in the whole sailboat racing deal," he struck up a conversation with a man behind the counter of a little marina in Michigan because he "was obviously a boater himself." One question about sailing led to another and soon Hybels sensed they would have many future conversations as they shared the joy of their sport. "To make a long (and remarkable) story short," he writes, "several years and hundreds of incredible, God-

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ordained conversations later, [my friend] chose to give his life to Christ." Sharing their heartfelt interest in sports opened doors to a spiritual friendship with one another and God. "Based on my experience," Hybels concludes, "most people who wind up in the kingdom of God can trace their salvation back to a single, life-changing conversation with a Christ-follower. This is the power of staying the course until you uncover mutual interests with the people you're talking to."<sup>7</sup>

"The Lord has been doing some incredible things," a friend has told me about an Upward basketball program at his church in Virginia. "Not only have players brought their family and friends to church and are seeing them come to know the Lord, but one grandfather of a player who attended our games recently was saved. He passed on three weeks later and I had the privilege of performing his home going with eleven others coming to a saving knowledge of Christ. It was said by many of the family if it were not for Upward, his heart would not have been tendered. Praise the Lord."<sup>8</sup>

The bridge ministry of sports programs may even extend to countries where more traditional avenues have been ineffective. In 2000, the Islamic Egyptian government began partnering with a group of Christian churches, the International Sports Coalition, to host the annual Kids Games in Cairo. "Prior to that there were no options for the church to use any government facilities such as stadiums and other venues," a friend tells me. "Because of this other cities across Egypt were able to get stadiums from the government in their areas. This year there will be over 100,000 kids participating in the Arab world alone. There will be two and a half million kids worldwide participating in Kids Games because of what was started in Egypt in 2000."<sup>9</sup>

Thus, to "play with a purpose" can be an appropriate mantra for members of the body of Christ.<sup>10</sup> Using sports, recreation, and leisure pursuits to impact people's lives spiritually – whether we call such church recreational programs "bridge ministries," "crossover ministries," or even "life-style evangelism" – can be fully integrated into the church's central purpose. "That purpose," N. T. Wright observes, "is clearly stated in the New Testament: that through the church God will announce to the wider world that he is indeed its wise, loving, and just creator: that through Jesus he has defeated the powers that corrupt and enslave it; and that by his Spirit he is at work to heal and renew it."<sup>11</sup> A church recreation ministry can help achieve this purpose, Ray Conner writes, by being "a catalyst in outreach, an aid to worship, an instrument for missions action, an opportunity to practice discipleship, a vehicle for ministry, a channel of service and support, an environment for fellowship, a tool for teaching, an avenue for abundant living and a place of service and an opportunity to serve."<sup>12</sup>

## **MORE THAN A SPORTS LEAGUE**

In sports programs like Upward Unlimited®, church members from different denominations practice working together in common ministry.

“Two basic models of church cooperation have existed in communities since Upward began,” states Shane McKenzie, Vice President of Operations for Upward Unlimited. Sometimes several congregations work collectively to sponsor a single program. In other cases, the congregations operate their programs independently, but cooperate with one another on scheduling, planning, equipment, or space. “We are hoping another model [for a city-wide league] is emerging from one of these two scenarios to reach even more children and their families,” McKenzie reports. “For example, we are meeting right now with pastors of seventeen different churches in Birmingham, Alabama, to explore how to reach the approximately 98,000 unreached youth there.”<sup>13</sup>

Another valuable aspect of these programs is that many volunteers develop skills and passion for sharing their faith. I challenged a “travel team” baseball coach, who had served for several years in a church sports program in Arkansas, to continue his outreach with his players and their families. “We have always kept the Lord in the forefront of this team, but I know we can take this to another level,” he replied, and he decided at each practice he would invite “a boy to share his testimony, how accepting Jesus has changed his life, or any other life changing event they wish to cover. That will then allow me to praise the boy and expand on the importance of a direct relationship with Jesus Christ. I will discuss at our next practice and lead off with my own personal relationship with Christ.”<sup>14</sup> The day before the coach was to share his own story with his team, via a telephone conversation he led a woman to a saving knowledge of Christ. “I’m convinced I was willing and able to share my faith with this person because I was preparing to do so at baseball practice with my boys the following night. I didn’t want to ask them to do something I wasn’t willing to do.”<sup>15</sup>

When volunteer coaches, referees, score keepers, and administrators, and participants and their families embrace the Christian-walk embodied in church sports programs and apply those practices in their athletic lives “outside” the walls the church, then an ultimate victory scenario has been created.

Sports, recreation, and leisure programs like Upward Unlimited® invite people to be the body of Christ in the community. Believers who participate in these programs mature as disciples as they learn to live out their faith through sports competition on the field, court, gymnastics mat, or in the swimming pool. They develop a lifestyle that permeates their congregation

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**“Play with a purpose” becomes an appropriate mantra when sports, recreation, and leisure programs that impact people’s lives spiritually are fully integrated into the church’s central mission.**

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and community, and God's kingdom expands because the church and her people are on mission.

## NOTES

1 Caz McCaslin, a recreation minister at a church in Spartanburg, South Carolina, began Upward Basketball in 1986. New programs in soccer, cheer, and flag football were added in 2000. Almost half a million young people participated in Upward Unlimited® programs in 2007 ([www.upward.org/about.aspx?coll\\_id=62&id=122](http://www.upward.org/about.aspx?coll_id=62&id=122)).

2 "Evangelism is Most Effective among Kids" (Ventura, CA: The Barna Group, October 11, 2004), available online at [www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=172](http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=172).

3 Upward Unlimited® ([www.upward.org](http://www.upward.org)) offers detailed materials and training for volunteers to support the ministry-focus of these leagues.

4 Agnes Durant Pylant, *Church Recreation* (Nashville, TN: Convention Press, 1959), 7.

5 Neil MacQueen, "Are Kids Too Busy for Sunday School?" revised version (September 2007), available online at [www.sundaysoftware.com/stats2.htm](http://www.sundaysoftware.com/stats2.htm).

6 Rodger Oswald, "Why Should a Church Have a Sports Ministry?" MP3/Compact Disc A2 (San Jose, CA: Church Sports International, 2001).

7 Bill Hybels, *Just Walk Across the Room: Simple Steps Pointing People to Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 86-87.

8 Jim Fryer in personal correspondence (February 3, 2001).

9 Maged Fawzy in personal correspondence (June 18, 2007).

10 I am borrowing the phrase "Play with A Purpose" from the theme for the 1997 National Recreation and Sports Ministers Conference.

11 N. T. Wright, *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2006), 204.

12 Ray Conner, *The Ministry of Recreation* (Nashville, TN: Convention Press, 1992), 73-74.

13 Shane MacKenzie in an interview with Jordan Cox (May 12, 2008).

14 Gary Harris in personal correspondence (April 7, 2007).

15 Gary Harris in personal correspondence (April 16, 2007).



### JORDAN COX

is Assistant Women's Golf Coach at Baylor University in Waco, TX.