



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Play On!
(Sports, pp. 11-18)

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Christian Reflection

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Play On!

If sports have become the playthings of irresponsible corporations, and being a sports fan often turns into a hollow, pseudo-religious semblance of true belonging, there yet remains the undeniable beauty of the sports themselves and the creatures of God who find themselves so irresistibly drawn to them.

Responsive Prayer

God, we celebrate sports, and the hard work, training, and sacrifice displayed in true athletic competition.

Though we may face one another on athletic venues as fans and competitors, we always come back together as a community, a body of believers, a family of faith.

It is so easy to lose ourselves in the joys of competition and the fanfare of our games.

Our first and final identity is in Christ alone. Let us not forget that together we are the Body of Christ. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Philippians 3:12-16

Meditation¹

Sports are simply a grace: a minor grace, but a grace nonetheless.... Sports relieve the weight of life. They satisfy, in an innocent way, our competitive urges. They remind us, precisely in their absurd elevation of the trivial, not to take ourselves too seriously. There are those, it is true, whose preoccupation with sports becomes so all-consuming as to constitute a moral disorder. A life lived in a sports bar is a life ill spent. But for the great majority of us, sports provide a pleasurable interlude in life for which we not only need not repent, but for which we should offer continuing prayers of gratitude.

James A. Nuechterlein

Reflection

What draws most of us so powerfully to play sports, to anticipate and watch and remember pivotal games, and to mark our lives by major athletic events? Reflecting back on his first sports allegiances – to the great Pittsburgh Steelers football teams of his childhood, and to the wonderful Brazilian national soccer team favored in the 1982 World Cup – Eric Miller says that he was taken up into something grand and beautiful, beyond himself. “It was the public nature of the joy that so affected me,” he writes. “I was changed forever.”

Here Miller puts his finger on two dimensions of sports’ magnetic power: (1) they give us much joy as athletes and fans, and (2) in sharing this joy with others who support our team, we form friendships and loyalties that shape who we are.

- ▶ *We take joy in training for, participating in, and watching sporting events.* “How we glory in exceptional play,” Miller writes. “We delight in honest, fierce competition. We thrill to witness the fruit of difficult, demanding training. We watch, enchanted, as our athletes hurtle themselves toward their dreams, whole-hearted, full-spirited, focused on the prize, acting together, giving all. We sense our spirits rise. It is just a game, we know, we know. But it hints, somehow, at that which lies beneath the game, yet is also deeply integral to life on this wondrous earth.”



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A Series in Faith and Ethics

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► *We gain a sense of individual identity through sports.* When educational opportunities, work, or family needs require us to move across the country, we often maintain our allegiances to favorite teams. The athletic seasons we anticipate and relive, the logos we wear, and the sports-based friendships we form, become part of who we are. “In many people’s lives, sport has acquired an importance that goes beyond that of mere amusement or entertainment,” writes Archbishop Stanislaw Rylko. It “has become a way of life, an essential element for meeting basic needs, such as self-esteem and self-fulfillment, and a factor that not only determines a sense of identity and belonging, but also the meaning of life itself.”²

Our identity and unity as Americans owes much to sports as well. “By the turn of the twentieth century something new had to be found to ensure that the recently electrified, urbanized, imperial nation had a great, upstanding citizenry to match—especially in view of the massive, darkly kaleidoscopic movement of migrants and immigrants that was transfiguring cities from Boston to Los Angeles,” Miller observes. “Sport became the city’s way of preserving the ancient field, and sports-teams a means of preserving the venerable village, both so necessary for any vital experience of the good life.” And so, we crown our sports heroes as “All-Americans.”

Yet, we must acknowledge a dark side to the story of modern American sports, which is crystallized in the disgraceful treatment and spiteful disregard of the Carlisle Indians football team’s accomplishments. Our favorite sports are so thoroughly tainted with our national failings, Miller concludes, they “leave decent folk longing for far truer forms of membership, of belonging, of citizenship.”

Study Questions

1. How important are sports and competitive games in your life today? Has their significance changed over the years? How important are sports to your family members and friends, and in your community?
2. Consider one of the sports or competitive games you play or watch most often. What aspects of this activity give you joy?
3. Discuss Archbishop Rylko’s claim that for many athletes and fans today, their allegiance to sports “not only determines a sense of identity and belonging, but also the meaning of life itself.” Is there a proper role for sports in shaping our sense of identity? Are there dangers in gaining identity this way?
4. In Philippians 3:12-16, how does the Apostle Paul deploy sports metaphors to remind us of our true identity in Christ?
5. In his new hymn “We Give Our All to Christ,” how does Terry York interpret Christian discipleship as a “race”?

Departing Hymn: “We Give Our All to Christ”

1 James A. Nuechterlein, “The Weird World of Sports,” *First Things*, 84 (June-July 1998), 12 [verbs changed to plural].

2 Archbishop Stanislaw Rylko, Preface, *The World of Sport Today: A Field of Christian Mission* (2005).

Play On!

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Responsive Prayer	Responsive Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, 2, and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To introduce how sports and competitive games, whether we are athletes or fans, can be good sources of joy in our lives.
2. To evaluate how our allegiances in sports help to determine our identities as persons.
3. To consider how sports metaphors can be used to describe Christian discipleship.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Sports (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting.

Begin with a Story

Eric Miller recalls that when he was thirteen years old, he did not want his family to move from western Pennsylvania to Brazil. "The reasons were many, readily discernable to anyone with a whit of insight. But the one that played most painfully upon my day-to-day longings had something to do with this: the Pirates had won the World Series the previous fall. The Steelers had won the Super Bowl four out of the previous six Januaries," he writes. "I loved sports. And I knew victory. Both were *sweet*. Indescribably sweet."

"Within two years I would be swept up in a sports storm that even now bursts from my memory with titanic force. Upon hitting that red Brazilian dirt, in the summer of 1980, I began what turned out to be a shockingly rapid conversion to *futebol*, trading glove and cap for *kichute* and *camisa*, the soccer cleats and team-shirts my new friends wore. They were *Americanos*, yes, but where it mattered they were Brazilian: on the field. They took me and my brothers into the wonder-world of Brazilian soccer—*futebol arte*, as the Brazilians joyed to call it—where legends lived and heroes danced, sweeping across the field with delicacy and force, with vibrancy and focus and delight, magicians with a ball, making magic for the world."

Whatever our favorite sport, we can resonate with Miller's passionate sports loyalties. How much are our identities shaped by the sports we play and the teams we root for?

Responsive Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by reading together the responsive prayer in the study guide. The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Philippians 3:12-16 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

This discussion introduces three themes that run through the *Sports* issue and study guides: the intrinsic goodness of the joys of athletic competition for both athletes and fans; how our identities are formed around the sports we play and watch; and the distorted nature of organized sports today. As time permits, allow group members to share their personal experiences in sports. Even those who are not athletes or avid fans will appreciate the opportunity to articulate and examine the important roles that sports have in societies around the world today.

Study Questions

1. Encourage members to reflect on their participation in sports and competitive games as athletes and fans, in informal contexts and organized leagues. Over their lifetimes, have they changed the sports that they play and watch, the teams they support, and so on? If so, why? Even if some members do not participate in sports now, they can reflect on how their family, friends, and community are being shaped by sports. Do they think that sports and competitive games have been a good influence or an unwelcome distraction in their lives? How would they be different if they had not participated in sports?
2. You might ask members to identify one or two sports or competitive games they enjoy, and then pair them with others who have a similar interest in order to brainstorm how that sport has given them joy. Athletes might mention the thrill of competition, the pleasure of developing athletic skills, the joy of teamwork, the challenge of preparing teams and organizing leagues, the sense of history of the sport, friendships they make, the structure that anticipating and observing athletic seasons give to their lives, pride in their loved one's athletic accomplishments, and so on.
When small groups report back to the whole group, compare the attractions of each sport. Do members notice common themes or significant differences in their enjoyment of various sports? What accounts for the similarities and differences they report (e.g., playing versus watching, degree of involvement, age, region of the country, friendships, and so on)?
3. Divide members into two groups to brainstorm (1) the proper role of sports in shaping one's identity and (2) the dangers of basing our identity on sports. One group might note the role of sports in developing athletes (in physical skills, moral virtues like courage and perseverance, intellectual virtues of strategic planning and quick decision-making, teamwork, proper self-esteem, and so on) and fans (in friendship, empathy, patience, and so on). Identifying with a sport or team can help us feel at home in a specific city or region. The other group might mention problems like misplaced loyalties, shallow friendships, moral compromise in winning at all costs, divisions from other fans, preoccupation with sports to the neglect of other relationships, and so on.
4. The Apostle Paul has been explaining his changed perspective toward the law: he once worked zealously and sought "a righteousness of my own that comes from the law" (Philippians 3:9), but now he seeks to know "Jesus Christ my Lord," to "gain Christ" (3:8), and to rely on the righteousness that comes from God through Christ's faithfulness. He does not want the Philippians to think this transformation of his goals occurred instantaneously, or that he does not struggle to keep his new commitment to Christ. Becoming like Christ and trusting in his faithfulness rather than our own accomplishments, is a process like a race: it calls for commitment, stamina, and concentration on the real goal—loving communion with God, which Paul describes as "the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus" (3:14).
5. Terry York interprets our commitment as giving "heart and soul and mind" to Christ's lordship. Loving communion with Christ is the prize for which we compete (verse 2), but Christ is also the one who calls us to begin the race (verse 3) and enables us to run with perseverance (verses 3 and 4). The final verses sparkle with paradoxes: this running toward and with Christ is not a race we finish and leave behind, but a eternity long game of love (verse 4), and the winner's wreath of loving communion is "both prize and gift"—love that we are receiving from Christ and now offer back to him.

Departing Hymn

"We Give Our All to Christ" is on pp. 55-57 of *Sports*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.