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Sport Goes to Church

Amy Rose and Shirl Hoffman

Tebow-mania may have subsided after the Broncos lost to the New England Patriots in the recent NFL playoffs, but the link between sport and American religion is as strong as ever. In many ways, it is a natural connection. As historians point out, sport made its first appearance in culture as a form of religious ritual and, while the smoking altars that occupied the athletic grounds at Corinth, Nemea, and Delphi have long since been extinguished, religion remains an important feature of modern sports.

Using sport as an arm of the Christian ministry dates back over a century, but the idea didn't really catch on in the United States until the 1950s when groups such as the Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) and later Athletes in Action (AIA) and Pro Athletes Outreach were formed. Estimates are that more than 60 religious organizations organize ministries around sport.

While some are small, others, like FCA and AIA, have large staffs and enthusiastic supporters. AIA has a presence in



Courtesy of Baylor University Photography

over 150 campuses; FCA held more than 33,000 events across the country last year for nearly 1.5 million attendees.

Goals of sport ministry programs are far ranging, from evangelizing athletes and fans to counseling athletes through difficult personal and sport-related problems, to teaching about ethical conduct in sport. Pro Athletes Outreach bills itself as a ministry of pros to pros; it serves the spiritual and emotional needs of athletes and their families through conferences and seminars.

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All Major League Baseball teams welcome Baseball Chapel, Inc. into their locker rooms each Sunday morning to lead services for players. Many who minister to teams do so as chaplains. Recognizing how easily moral compasses can become skewed in a fiercely competitive and glitzy profession, some NFL coaches view chaplains as part of the support team, often supplying them with tickets to games and providing them with offices in the team complex.

But these sport ministries focus on a much bigger picture than big-time sports. Church athletic leagues were first formed over a century ago, but in recent decades, churches—and especially megachurches—have taken the idea to a new level, building sport and fitness complexes that rival many small liberal arts colleges and hiring professionally trained staff to oversee activities.

The Cecil B. Day Sport and Fitness Center at Dunwoody Baptist Church in Atlanta, for example, enrolls as many as 500 kids in its soccer league, 250 in its basketball program, and 1,000 in its summer sport and activity camps. The Second Baptist Church in Houston sponsors 64 softball teams, 48 basketball teams, 6 bowling lanes, and a first-rate fitness center overseen by a team of professionals. Last year Upward Sports, a nationwide Christian youth league, enrolled

more than 550,000 elementary school children in its basketball, flag football, soccer, and cheerleading experiences.

In many cases, co-opting sport is a logical outgrowth of the desire of churches to relate more directly to their local communities; they see sport programs as a way of fostering this relationship. “The church is learning that they need to meet people in their communities,” says Steve Conner of Sports Outreach International. “There are few genuine relationships anymore. Sport can be used to engage parishioners and also the non-churched by providing an activity in a safe environment where all can thrive physically, socially, and emotionally.” Adds Ron Rainwater, a professor of sport ministry at Hardin-Simmons, “I don’t know that there is anything more visibly powerful than bringing people together through sports. It automatically builds community, and if you can infuse that with a message, it becomes more powerful.”

As the demand for religious professionals trained to serve the athletic and broader community has grown, so have undergraduate and graduate programs for preparing them, some of them anchored in kinesiology departments. At Hardin-Simmons University’s two-year-old sport ministry graduate program, ethics are blended into life lessons taught through sport.



John White, director of chaplaincy and sport ministry program at Baylor University (photo courtesy of Baylor University)

“Every second, athletes have an opportunity to make decisions, and they are often ethical decisions,” says Dr. Bob Moore, director of the kinesiology, sport, and recreation program at HSU. “Even students who go on to jobs in the secular areas of sport and recreation will have a strong ethical base to guide them when interacting with others, making ethical decisions, and coaching young athletes through their development.”

The recently founded chaplaincy and ministry program at Baylor University housed in the George W. Truett Theological Seminary will offer its first full load of courses in the fall

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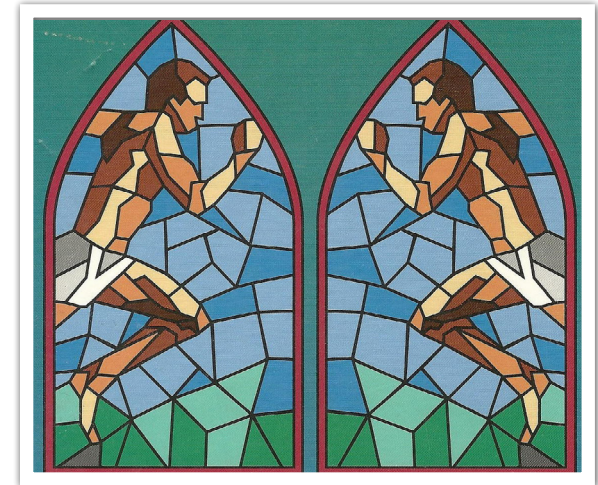
of 2012. The fledgling program is directed by Dr. John White, a sports enthusiast who spent 16 years working with AIA before earning his PhD in theology at the University of Edinburgh. White has given much thought to the ethics of sports: "All through the program we're thinking about sports historically, theologically, and culturally." The program also teaches students a holistic approach of ministering to a person's mind, body, and spirit through sport and physical activity. "There are certain values, whether you are Christian or not, that people know are important," White says. "These are the values that need to be integrated into our sport programs through athletes, coaches, and administrators."

Sport ministries owe their recent resurgence in part to the apparent failure of sport to bolster the character of athletes. While some sport sociologists point out how difficult it is to evaluate the character-building effects of sport, Peter Walters, president of the Christian Society for Kinesiology and Leisure Studies (CSKLS), believes ethical guidance is necessary. "If sports alone improved character, professional athletes would be the most outstanding people on earth, because of their years spent in athletic training and competition," he says. "But through athletic programs designed intentionally to teach character, kids can be taught such life les-

sons as how to win and lose through grace, how to continue to persevere and never give up and have respect for others on your team and competing against you." White says that Baylor University would like to eventually offer continuing education workshops and symposiums for sport professionals that might be struggling with ethical issues and need more guidance in handling these situations.

Many sport ministry programs have an international outreach through missionary and service organizations. The International Sports Coalition is a network of organizations that facilitate sport ministry around the world. Conner tells of an ISC project involving Ethiopian pastors who went into an area of Ethiopia known as a garbage town. "These are the poorest people of a poor country and the area is ruled by gangs," Conner says. "The gang members had a weight room where they worked out and gathered. The pastors began by just working out in the weight room with the gang members. Eventually, they not only converted a few of the gang members to Christianity, but they helped in the conversion of a house of prostitution into a church and a drug house into offices for their thriving sport ministry program."

Conner also says that more and more Christian college sport teams in the United States are being encouraged to take service



trips to underdeveloped countries during their spring break, not only as a service to others but also a team-building exercise. "When your team is down in the fourth quarter, who do you want in there, a team that has relaxed on the beach together or a team that has dug latrines in South Africa alongside each other?" asks Conner.

Academia, churches, and athletes are finding that there are many ways that sport and faith can blend in education and life. Through these new avenues of study and thought, leaders are striving to create a more ethical generation of students. These future leaders will be prepared to tackle the complexity of sport and competition while also being a positive influence in the culture-shaping arena of sport so that it can continue to flourish.