

# When Sports and Religion Mix

BY PHILIP WISE

**The links between organized sports and religion in our culture sometimes do more harm to our faith than good. Are there healthy ways of relating our sports lives, as participants or spectators, to our Christian discipleship?**

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**G**rowing up in a small town in South Alabama, I knew two verities — sports and religion. More specifically, we enjoyed the choice to support the University of Alabama or Auburn University and the choice to join the local Methodist or Baptist church. All other schools and denominations were understood to be inferior.

I grew up in a bifurcated family. My father was not a Christian and did not attend church. My mother was a devout Baptist Sunday School teacher. They differed on the relative importance of religion and sports. My mother made church attendance mandatory. My father thought sports *was* a religion. He would have agreed with Methodist minister Bill Floyd on the subject, as former Alabama coach and ESPN commentator Bill Curry recalls the story:

When I first arrived in Tuscaloosa as the head football coach in 1987 there were death threats — some folks really did not want a Georgia Tech man as their coach. Our minister in Atlanta, Bill Floyd, called our home, concerned about our well-being. My wife answered and he asked, “Carolyn, are you and Bill OK?” My brave girl answered, “Oh we are fine. We have learned that football is a religion over here.”

“Oh, no, Carolyn,” exclaimed Reverend Floyd, “It’s a lot more important than that.”<sup>1</sup>

Religion did get mixed with sports at church. During my teenage years our pastor, Dr. Robert Marsh, told lots of stories about sports heroes who were fine Christians. One especially memorable summer revival featured Bill Glass, the former Baylor University and NFL player, as the visiting

evangelist. It was an accepted truism that the lessons learned on the playing field could be translated into Christian virtues. I cannot remember a lesson or illustration that suggested sports might diminish one's religious fervor.

As a teenager in the 1960's, I was enthralled by athletes. Baltimore Orioles third baseman Brooks Robinson was my favorite baseball player. The Celtics' Bob Cousy was my basketball hero. Well-known university athletes

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from the Fellowship of Christian Athletes spoke at local religious events. I remember Steve Sloan, the Alabama quarterback, speaking to an overflow crowd in the local elementary school auditorium.

I played all kinds of organized sports – football,

basketball, baseball, and tennis. Because I had been called to become a minister and was a good high school athlete, I began to "give my testimony" in churches. Athletes have a religious currency in our culture that non-athletes simply do not have, and as an all-state basketball player, my currency was growing. I received an athletic scholarship to play basketball at Samford University, where I became a member of the FCA and spoke (preached) at high school gatherings. Ironically, it was my father's sports fanaticism that prompted the realization of my mother's religious hopes.

When I returned to Alabama after completing my theological training in the late 1970s, this linkage between sports and religion was still strong in the state. It was a big plus for a pastor to be able to play sports and talk about sports. In the three churches that I served in Alabama, I invited coaches and players to speak from the pulpit.

I will never forget having Florida State head football coach Bobby Bowden speak at my church in Dothan. Arriving a few minutes before the evening service, he congratulated me on having evening service ("Most churches have quit doing that," he lamented) and asked how many people would attend. He guessed thirty or forty, but I predicted that the sanctuary would be full. As I expected, all the seats – fourteen hundred of them – were filled, and even more folks stood throughout the service. It was the largest crowd in my thirteen years at the church. Bobby had not prepared his talk; he spoke extemporaneously and repeated himself frequently. As I greeted people after the service, one after another said, "Wasn't that great?" The truth is that it was not a great sermon, but it was given by Bobby Bowden.

What are we to make of this amalgam of religion and sports? The novelist and commentator Robert Lipsyte worries that an infatuation with sports has permeated every area of American life, especially for males. "Jock Culture," he writes, "is the incubator of most definitions of manly success,"

which has done at least as much harm as good.<sup>2</sup> If that is true, what has been the effect of sports mania on Christian faith and institutions?

In the New Testament we find little direct guidance on the role of sports in discipleship. The Apostle Paul alludes to the ancient Olympic athletes:

Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it. Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable garland, but we an imperishable one. So I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air; but I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified.

*1 Corinthians 9:24-27*

He uses similar athletic analogies in describing his ministry (Galatians 2:1-2) and Christian discipleship (1 Timothy 4:7-8).

While a linkage between sports and the Christian faith can be made (and I would contend that it is not wrong to do so), it certainly can be overdrawn. A line of Jesus Sports Statues show the robed Christ playing modern sports. "Your favorite young sports enthusiast will enjoy receiving one of these statues which features Jesus playing a popular sport with the children He loves!" one online marketer exudes. "Choose from Jesus playing many sports including hockey, baseball, and more...."<sup>3</sup> These statues imply that Jesus played sports, enjoys our sports, wants us to play sports, but none of these statements can be proved and all of them are at least partially false.

What are some healthy ways of relating our sports lives, as participants or spectators, to our discipleship? First, we can use sports to learn about ourselves. When we lose our temper or cheat while competing in a sports event, it reveals a character flaw that needs addressing. Sports, like many other practices in life, can work like a Rorschach test for Christian character. Do we quit too easily? Are we resistant to discipline? Are we too individualistic? One does not have to compete in sports in order to answer these questions, but athletic competition often reveals the truth about our inner lives.

A second way that sports can be helpful in the Christian life is to provide an opportunity to develop genuine friendships. Some of my best friends are people I met as competitors, coaches, fans, or teammates. With them I can talk about what really matters to us, including our faith. I have had the opportunity to share my faith on the golf course, in the locker room, and while sharing a meal with a friend I made through athletics. For many of these friends, I am their "unofficial" pastor.

Sports can also provide opportunities for ministry. Many congregations have opened their family life centers to their neighborhoods as a way of showing love and concern for non-members. Through sports camps, leagues, and coaching clinics they reach out to those around them. Sports are one of the most effective ways to connect with people in other cultures;

for this reason many mission trips now have a sports focus.

Athletes and coaches can affirm their Christian faith in public ways. Some people will scoff at athletes who talk about Jesus when they are interviewed after a winning game or a successful round of golf. It is easy to understand their skepticism since some of these athletes have very public failings. Nevertheless, I am thankful for those athletes and coaches whose faith goes beyond a sound-bite. I have known many who are solid churchmen and churchwomen, whose faith is not a public posture, but a sincere personal commitment to Christ. When people like that speak positively about how their faith has shaped their lives, it can make a difference to the people who hear or read their words.

Finally, sports stories can be used in sermons. While some congregants wish their preacher would never use another illustration from the world of sports, others cannot get enough. My own judgment is that sports stories should be carefully chosen and sparingly inserted in sermons.

We must remember that we are not called to proclaim Jesus as the greatest athlete, but as the Savior of the world. To the extent that sports stories in sermons, testimonies by faithful athletes and coaches, or church-based sports camps and leagues help us share that good news, then they can be useful in our ministry.

## NOTES

1 Bill Curry, "Bama-Auburn a Year-Round Affair," *ESPN.com* (November 18, 2004), available online at [sports.espn.go.com/ncf/columns/story?columnist=curry\\_bill&id=1925995](http://sports.espn.go.com/ncf/columns/story?columnist=curry_bill&id=1925995).

2 Robert Lipsyte, "'Jock Culture' Permeates Life," *USA Today* (April 10, 2008), 11A, available online at [blogs.usatoday.com/oped/2008/04/jock-culture-pe.html](http://blogs.usatoday.com/oped/2008/04/jock-culture-pe.html). For more on "Jock Culture," see Mr. Lipsyte's Web site, [www.robertlipsyte.com](http://www.robertlipsyte.com).

3 The statues are sold by many online stores. This advertisement is on the Jesus Sports Statues page at [www.stpatricksguild.com](http://www.stpatricksguild.com).



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