



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

- 📖 Long-Distance Running
(*Sports*, pp. 67-71)
- 📖 Joyful Recreation
(*Sports*, pp. 48-54)

Suggested Article:

- 📖 When Playing Becomes Sports
(*Sports*, pp. 87-93)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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Exploring the Joy of Sports

Sports offer the simple joy of using the physical body as part of an abundant life. Yet only part of sports is physical. They form a refreshing connectedness to nature, the self, others, and God.

Responsive Prayer

God, you created us to use our bodies

to run and jump, to throw and catch;

you created us to use our minds

to think and feel, to reflect and express;

you created us to relate our bodies and minds

to connect with ourselves, each other, and you.

In sports and athletic competition

we can engage our bodies and our minds,

we can connect with ourselves, our community, and you.

God, come near to us now and enjoy your creation

as we worship you, the Creator. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 40:28-31

Reflection

In order to draw the sharpest possible contrast between the true God of Israel and the idols that people were tempted to fear, the prophet Isaiah insists that Yahweh is the unique and everlasting creator of the universe. Throughout the creation – in a graceful eagle’s continuous flight or a tireless runner’s loping strides – we can glimpse God’s creative strength (40:28-31).

For Hannah Elliott, who continues long-distance running for her health and for recreation, imaging God’s grace and strength is part of the joy of her sport. She reflects on several other joys of running.

- ▶ Elliott’s coaches and mentors *emphasized daily discipline and wise training*, for “there are no shortcuts to quicker legs, stronger arms, and ever more efficient lungs.” From these lessons in patience and perseverance grew lifelong habits of “showing up on time, following through on a commitment, and diligently finishing projects to the best of one’s ability.”
- ▶ She *developed a “centered sense of self,”* a bracing resolve and self-understanding that “does not get ruffled by detractors or early-morning wake-up calls. A calm wherewithal that accepts, even embraces, inclement weather. A physical courage that is not diminished as another hill comes into view.”
- ▶ The activity of *long-distance running provides opportunities for self-reflection*. Many runners remember specific runs that “conjured up novel insights about themselves, their spouses, parents, or friends,” she notes. “Learning about who I am as an individual lets me relate more fully to other individuals and to fulfill my role as wife, friend, sister, and daughter.”
- ▶ *Training for competition opens “a window to our character, or the lack thereof.”* We see courage, strength of will, and honesty of commitments. “UCLA coaching legend John Wooden got it only half right when he said that sports do not *develop* character, they *reveal* it. I have found that strength of character can be molded on the



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sweltering afternoons, winding trails, and muddy inclines that make up a cross country season.”

- ▶ *Long-distance running has been a source of close friendships* for Elliott. Anyone can afford to participate in this simple sport at some level, and it has not been debased by consumerism. “When athletic contests become about entertaining an audience, creating a celebrity image, or making money, the true nature of sport dies, and with it the joy that naturally results from using a body and mind created by God.”

Simple sports – because they require no expensive equipment or highly specialized training of participants – can unite people from different walks of life, classes, and backgrounds in joyful recreation. Jan Steen’s *Skittle Players outside an Inn* (1660-1663) – on the cover of the *Sports* issue – celebrates this aspect of sports. A startling mixture of villagers – men and women, old and young, wealthy and poor, leisured and working people – are drawn together on a carefree afternoon. The skittles contest becomes an occasion for relaxing play and community gathering. In Steen’s composition, bold splashes of bright red draw our attention not to the figure of the wealthy man, but to two women and barefoot child. Rather than embellish the wealth and status of his subjects, Steen celebrates their commonness.

Study Questions

1. For Elliott, what are the joys of long-distance running? Choose one sport or game that you enjoy. Are the joys you experience from that activity similar or different from those Elliott mentions?
2. “I did not deliberately choose to become a long-distance runner,” Elliott says, “but gradually it has become a part of my daily life, and I have become a better person because of it.” How has the sport of running molded her? Has your life been shaped for the better by participation in sports?
3. Rick Hoyle notes that despite the abundance of organized sports programs for youth, “very few young athletes – primarily those with above-average ability and a taste of competition – continue to play sports as adults.” In your experience, what draws young people to play sports? Why do they lose interest as they grow older?
4. Which sports today most successfully draw together people from differing social classes and backgrounds as participants? Which ones have limited appeal? Do you play a game or sport that draws a wide variety of participants?

Departing Hymn: “All That I Am I Owe to Thee” (vv. 1 and 4)

All that I am I owe to thee,
thy wisdom, Lord, has fashioned me;
I give my Maker thankful praise,
whose wondrous works my soul amaze.

Search me, O God, my heart discern,
try me, my inmost thought to learn;
and lead me, if in sin I stray,
to choose the everlasting way.

The Psalter (1912)

Tune: FEDERAL STREET

Exploring the Joy of Sports

Lesson Plans

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

Teaching Goals

1. To review the joys—physical, mental, and spiritual—that come from participating in particular sports.
2. To consider how young people can continue to enjoy participating in sports as they become adults.
3. To examine the role of contemporary sports in building community among people from different walks of life, classes, and backgrounds.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 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 and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “All That I Am I Owe to Thee” locate the familiar tune FEDERAL STREET in your church’s hymnal or on the Web at www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with an Observation

How would you describe the joy you experience in sports? “In the classic film *Chariots of Fire*, Eric Liddell tells his sister, who worries that his training for the 1924 Olympics has deferred plans to work at a mission in China, that cultivating his God-given talent is a way of honoring Him: ‘I believe that God made me for a purpose—for China. But he also made me fast, and when I run, I feel His pleasure.’

“I know what Liddell meant,” writes Hannah Elliott, who runs as an avocation. “The fabled runners’ high is no misnomer. Training diligently and then achieving a personal goal in a race, or enjoying a long slow jog down a wooded path, often returns such joy, contentment, optimism, and confidence that I sometimes wish I could keep running long after that day’s time limit or my body allows.

“Running is perhaps the purest expression of human physicality in the world. Anyone can do it, almost anywhere, and with no special equipment required—some of the best runners on the planet do not even wear shoes. Few activities can match its ability to form a refreshing connectedness to nature, the self, and God.” (*Sports*, p. 67)

Elliott reminds us of the multiple types of joy that we experience as we participate in and observe athletic activities.

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 Isaiah 40:28-31 from a modern translation.

Reflection

This discussion raises three interrelated questions about our enjoyment of sports: “As athletes and players, what do we enjoy about our favorite sport?” “To what extent do these joys draw us into community with others from differing backgrounds?” and “How can we maintain our enjoyment of a sport from childhood through adulthood?” These questions are highlighted in the two focus articles and suggested article

respectively. Start with the fundamental question of what we enjoy about sports, and then explore either the second or third questions as your group is interested and as its study time permits.

Study Questions

1. The study guide organizes the joys for Hannah Elliott of long-distance running under five categories: developing skills and virtues of discipline, gaining a centered sense of self, providing opportunities for self-reflection, understanding her own limits and moral character, and making close friendships. In the article she also mentions maintaining healthy exercise habits through adulthood.

Encourage members to compare Elliott's list to their own enjoyment of a particular sport. Several members who enjoy the same sport might brainstorm together on a list of their joys. Remember to consider physical, mental, and spiritual aspects of our delight in sport.

2. Elliott's comment suggests that a sport "grows" on us as we develop within its sphere. As a particular sport or game forms our bodies and physical skills, shapes our intellectual abilities and moral character, and brings us into friendships with others who share our love for the activity, we become long-distance runners, basketball players, or bowlers, and so on.

As members evaluate the bodily characteristics, physical skills, intellectual abilities, moral character traits, and friendships they have formed through participation in a particular sport, they should remember Elliott's warning about obsessing over our chosen sports. For some athletes, she writes, "Their undue focus on training, nutrition, and racing may alienate them from others, making it difficult for them to form or maintain meaningful relationships. There is a distinct line between enjoying a lifetime of activity and obsessively overtraining to achieve superfluous goals (or, we might add, sedentarily agonizing about the batting average of a particular icon while sitting in front of the TV at home). Either of the latter obsessions is a form of idolatry – a substitute for God used to pursue, develop, and affirm self-worth – which can never honor the Lord" (*Sports*, p. 70).

3. In *When Playing Becomes Sports*, Rick Hoyle contrasts "positive motives (bonding with one's children, promoting social development, teaching self-control and respect) and negative motives, primarily those that stem from overidentification (dreams of glory, young athlete as an investment, competition with other parents). Underlying the positive motives is a general view of sports participation as a means to making the young athlete a better person. The pleasure inherent in sports motivated by this goal raises the likelihood of lifelong participation" (*Sports*, pp. 88-89). He encourages a shift away from the talent-development model that currently pervades youth sports programs to a participation-promotion model.

Ask members to list the sports they played as children and young people. Which sports do they continue to play (or enjoy watching) as adults, and which ones have they abandoned? If they have learned to enjoy new sports or games as adults, what drew them to these new interests?

4. Football, basketball, baseball, and soccer draw participants and fans from many backgrounds; these large team sports are very popular in public schools, and with simple equipment young people can play a downsized neighborhood version. Golf, tennis, equestrian sports, lacrosse, etc, have more limited appeal because they require specialized training, expensive equipment, and specialized venues. Street dancing contests are more common in urban areas among the poor, and specialized forms like krumping are associated with one ethnic group. Games like bowling and shuffleboard are out of fashion among the wealthy and the young; stock car racing and hockey have limited regional appeal. So it is debatable whether particular sports bind us together today.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.