



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Upward Sports
(*Sports*, pp. 75-80)

Suggested Article:

- 📖 When Sports and Religion Mix
(*Sports*, pp. 71-74)
- 📖 God in the Gym
(*Sports*, pp. 81-86)

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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Upward Sports

Church sports, recreation, and leisure programs 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.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: 1 Corinthians 9:19-23

Meditation†

I think the church, rather than scratching for ways to harmonize its message with the present state of affairs, needs to roll up its sleeves and change sport, at least change sport that proceeds under its auspices.... Properly organized and played...[sports] can help us understand what the church fathers understood so clearly: that play is an expression of both body and soul; that in play we become imitators of the Logos, the “Heavenly Wisdom who plays upon the earth, co-fashioner with God.” But this will require the church to approach sports with loftier views, expecting sport fields to be places where we imitate the Logos by rehearsing and enacting spiritual truths until they are played into our bodies of which they are a part.

Shirl James Hoffman

Reflection

While he never bent the gospel for anyone’s ears, the Apostle Paul tells the proud and fractious Christians at Corinth, he has tailored how he presents himself to different people – those keeping Jewish laws, Gentiles who do not know Jewish rituals, and some less wise people with a weak conscience. “Though I am free with respect to all,” he says, “I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them” (1 Corinthians 9:19).

Following Paul’s advice, Jordan Cox invites us to consider how we can use the sports “side” of ourselves to share the good news of God’s love with integrity. For in our sports-attuned culture, Roger Oswald – the founder of Church Sports International – has noted, “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.”

Over the years Cox has been involved with Upward Unlimited®, which offers church-based basketball, soccer, flag-football, and cheerleading programs for children ages five through twelve. “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,” he writes. “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



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relationships across the community.”

Church sports programs like Upward, whose motto is “Every child plays, every child learns, every child is a winner,” emphasize mastery of a sport by every participant rather than the development of a few players’ exceptional talent. Research has shown that mastery-oriented youth sports programs “that promote positive parental involvement, a focus on teaching, respect and support for coaches, and adults who model good behavior can return sports participation to its rightful place as an enjoyable, lifelong activity,” psychologist Rick Hoyle observes.

Study Questions

1. According to Jordan Cox, what are the good outcomes of church-based sports and recreation leagues like the ones he describes?
2. Discuss the roles that sports and recreation presently play in the shared life and ministries of your congregation. Do you think these should be reduced, modified, or expanded?
3. Review the resources in your congregation for initiating or participating in a church-based sports program. What other resources are available in the community or among neighboring churches?
4. Consider the new citizens—immigrants and other recent arrivals—in your city. What sports or games do they play? How could your church minister to them through recreation?
5. Philip Wise warns us to “remember that we are not called to proclaim Jesus as the greatest athlete, but as the Savior of the world. To the extent that...church-based sports camps and leagues help us share that good news, then they can be useful in our ministry.” How can we avoid sending this sort of mixed message about the gospel?

Departing Hymn: “May the Mind of Christ My Savior” (vv. 1, 5, and 6)

May the mind of Christ, my Savior,
live in me from day to day,
by his love and power controlling
all I do and say.

May I run the race before me,
strong and brave to face the foe,
looking only unto Jesus
as I onward go.

May his beauty rest upon me,
as I seek the lost to win,
and may they forget the channel,
seeing only him.

Kate B. Wilkinson (1859-1928), alt.

Tune: ST LEONARDS

† Shirl James Hoffman, “Toward Narrowing the Gulf between Sport and Religion,” *Word & World*, 23:3 (Summer 2003), 311.

Upward Sports

Lesson Plans

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

Teaching Goals

1. To examine the positive outcomes of church-based sports leagues.
2. To review the roles that sports and recreation programs have in the shared life and ministries of your congregation.
3. To discuss how to maintain a proper focus on ministry within church-based sports and recreation programs.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 12-13 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 “May the Mind of Christ My Savior” locate the familiar tune ST LEONARDS in your church’s hymnal or on the Web at www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with a Story

When we share an interest in sports with a friend, it can be a natural entrée to deeper conversations about life and happiness and God. Jordan Cox writes, “Bill Hybels, the senior pastor of Willow Creek Community Church, relates a personal story that illustrates the point.... 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-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.’” (*Sports*, pp. 77-78)

Cox invites us to think about how congregations can develop programs of outreach and ministry based on the enjoyment of sports that their members share with one another and others in the community.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to guide your study of how to share the gospel with integrity through sports activities.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 from a modern translation.

Meditation

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

Reflection

No single sports program is appropriate for all churches. Therefore, use Jordan Cox's discussion of the Upward sports programs as a springboard to review the roles that sports, games, and recreation have in the shared life and ministries of your congregation.

To learn more about the sports programs described in Cox's article, see the Upward Unlimited® Web site www.Upward.org. More information about designing church-based sports and recreation ministries is available from The Association of Sports and Recreation Ministers (www.csrn.org) and Church Sports International (www.churchsports.org).

Study Questions

1. Jordan Cox describes these outcomes: (1) building Christian fellowship and skills among players and members who serve as league commissioners, coaches and assistant coaches, referees, team parents, half-time speakers, and prayer partners; (2) building bridges to other congregations that participate; (3) attracting participants from the community who are not involved in any church; (4) helping young athletes see sportsmanship as an opportunity to share their discipleship. He quotes Ray Conner's view that a sports ministry can be "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." Members might discuss how such programs could be useful ministries to specific populations in the community (e.g., young families, an immigrant population, children with little access to city or school-based sports programs, etc.).
2. Some congregations have a recreation minister and operate a sports or "family life" facility. Other congregations integrate games and recreation at church picnics or occasional gatherings. Children may enjoy day camps, youth may travel to summer retreats, or adults may attend professional sports events together. Do not forget such things as "Super Bowl" parties, guest athlete speakers, etc. How effective are these programs or events in terms of the various outcomes discussed in response to question one? Are the programs well integrated into the central purpose of the church? Do they attract wide participation?
3. Review your congregation's physical resources (buildings, playgrounds, sports equipment, transportation, etc.), creative and dedicated leadership, supportive church members, and athletes needed for a successful sports and recreation program. How could your church partner with other churches, schools, parks, and sports groups in your community?
4. The opening of a new neighborhood or the changing population in an older neighborhood might be the occasion to rethink the congregation's sports and recreation ministry. New families with young children may need different recreational opportunities than do maturing families. Immigrants may be less likely to participate in established city leagues, or they may enjoy different sports. Consider how your congregation's sports and recreation programs might be developed to welcome and serve people who are new to the community.
5. A distinction Rick Hoyle draws between a mastery orientation and a talent-development orientation in youth sports programs is helpful here. Programs with a mastery orientation encourage life-long participation in sports through development of everyone's athletic skills and friendships. They teach young people that athletic competition can be part of a rich and full life of discipleship. On the other hand, programs that emphasize development of exceptional talent put the focus on the gifted athletes. If the congregation offers a program with a talent-development orientation, it might proclaim that the church honors athletic greatness rather than follows the Christ who would draw all people into physical and spiritual wholeness and friendship with God.

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.