



Christian Reflection
A Series in Faith and Ethics

Christian Reflection
Center for Christian Ethics
Baylor University
One Bear Place #97361
Waco, TX 76798-7361
Phone 1-866-298-2325
www.ChristianEthics.ws

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Study Guides for

Sports

These guides integrate Bible study, prayer, and worship to examine the idea of sports and explore its promise for Christian discipleship. Use them individually or in a series. You may reproduce them for personal or group use.

- Play On!** 2
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.
- Exploring the Joy of Sports** 4
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.
- The Grace of Neighborhood Baseball Parks** 6
Something is essentially right about a culture that produces a thing so fundamentally good as the game of baseball. Yet in our suburban sprawl we have built “stadiums on steroids” to fund the runaway economics of professional sports. How can we return to building neighborhood ballparks, from the big leagues to Little League, which are centers of community life?
- Would Jesus Wear Face Paint?** 8
Being a fan captivates our imaginations, brings us great joy, and partly constitutes our identities. The satisfaction of victory is intoxicating and the camaraderie with other fans in defeat is ennobling. But are there moral limits to the exuberance of fandom?
- Sports in the Christian Life** 10
Sports, physical exercise, and recreational activity contribute to our development as spiritual beings composed of body and soul. Today as sports take on an increasingly large role in popular culture internationally, they are becoming a new field for twenty-first century Christian mission.
- Upward Sports** 12
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.



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Focus Article:

📖 Play On!
(Sports, pp. 11-18)

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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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► *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).



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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)

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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



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Focus Article:

📖 The Grace of Neighborhood Baseball Parks
(*Sports*, pp. 28-39)

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The Grace of Neighborhood Baseball Parks

Something is essentially right about a culture that produces a thing so fundamentally good as the game of baseball. Yet in our suburban sprawl we have built “stadiums on steroids” to fund the runaway economics of professional sports. How can we return to building neighborhood ballparks, from the big leagues to Little League, which are centers of community life?

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Hebrews 12:1-3

Meditation†

Every sport has its *kairos* moments, when as spectator or player, one becomes childlike again, or experiences the grace of human excellence, or bonds with complete strangers, or feels as if *chronos* time – the slow march toward death – is suspended.... [A sport] can become a signal of transcendence, a window into a world full of mystery and meaning.

This vague and elusive “signal of transcendence,” has a name for the Christian, who is not at all surprised to find this One even in the corrupt world of sports: “All things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist” (Colossians 1:16-17). He is the one who “fills all in all” (Ephesians 1:23).

Mark Galli

Reflection

Look closely at any built environment – the design and durability of public and private buildings, the layout of streets and freeways and sidewalks, the existence of parks and neighborhoods (or lack thereof) – and you will learn a lot about the character of the people who formed it and, in turn, are being formed by it. When we reflect as Christians about sports in this series of studies, we should examine the built environment for athletics in our cities.

“In the Christian view,” architect Philip Bess writes, “both the world and our selves are (in this order) *good, fallen* (i.e., in a state of disorder such that on our own we are incapable of fulfilling the purpose for which we have been created), and *redeemable and perfectible through the agency of divine grace*.” From this perspective, he asks, how should we think about baseball parks in our cities – of their nature and purpose, and ours?

- ▶ *There is a fundamental goodness to baseball*, Bess notes, for it is “a game that can be played well by persons of virtually any body type, and that also requires the most careful balance between both highly visible individual responsibility and achievement, and the communal purposes of a team.” He feels we are blessed with a complex economy that “allows good baseball players to devote themselves to baseball full time” in order to become better and achieve excellence.
- ▶ *Yet not all is well with baseball at its highest levels*. Our society’s “ideals of ordered liberty and equality of opportunity are mocked



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by our rampant consumerism and individualism at home, and by our mindless imposition of these latter vices abroad in the name of our allegedly most blessed way of life," warns Bess. "We have become a therapeutic culture that values celebrity and privilege over virtue; and this is reflected in the recent state of our National Pastime." One symptom of this disarray is the new larger and plusher baseball stadia isolated in "entertainment zones" of dying downtown districts. Bess believes "baseball's intrinsic and self-evident goodness is *best* when it occurs within the confines of an enclosed park in a traditional city neighborhood."

- ▶ *New professional baseball parks could contribute to good city neighborhoods.* "Cities and towns are cooperative human enterprises...to promote the best life possible for their citizens, and the fundamental unit of town planning and urban design is the neighborhood. The moral, economic, and environmental benefits of traditional neighborhoods are...designed primarily for *the walking human being.*" Our challenge is to build baseball parks that are "neighborhood-friendly." They enhance and help create traditional, mixed-use neighborhoods where young and the old, singles and families, the working classes and the wealthy, can live together.

Study Questions

1. Describing baseball as a "signal of transcendence," Philip Bess writes, "if only for a while, we step out of ordinary time and into eternity—at the very least into an altered sense of time, but sometimes into a genuinely blessed state of timelessness. It is this transcendent dimension of all play, including baseball, which makes us care about our games...." Have you ever experienced in sports what he is describing?
2. Do you agree with Bess that some flaws of America are evident in the condition of professional baseball today? Are these flaws evident other sports as well?
3. Bess identifies ten characteristics of a good city neighborhood. In your opinion, which of these are most important? Does your community share these features?
4. Can a major baseball park, or other sports facility, be the hub of a healthy neighborhood rather than a 'don't-build-it-in-my-back-yard' eyesore? How can Bess's eight "imperatives" lead to parks that enhance or help create a neighborhood?

Departing Hymn: "Blest Be the Tie that Binds" (vv. 1 and 2)

Blest be the tie that binds
our hearts in Christian love;
the fellowship of kindred minds
is like that to that above.

Before our Father's throne
we pour our ardent prayers;
our fears, our hopes, our aims are one,
our comforts and our cares.

John Fawcett (1782)

Tune: DENNIS



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Focus Article:

📖 Would Jesus Wear Face Paint?
(Sports, pp. 40-47)

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Would Jesus Wear Face Paint?

Being a fan captivates our imaginations, brings us great joy, and partly constitutes our identities. The satisfaction of victory is intoxicating and the camaraderie with other fans in defeat is ennobling. But are there moral limits to the exuberance of fandom?

Responsive Prayer

God, we spend more energy, time, and money on our sports culture, than we do in service to you. We even worship favorite sports stars and teams.

We fail to see you because of our blind allegiance to our team.

Our priorities and focus are out of sync with your calling.

God, help us see sports and the gifts of athleticism as ways of creating community, caring for our bodies as your temple, and serving you.

Help us through sports and athletic competitions serve one another and your kingdom rather than our own. May we glorify you and not ourselves. Amen.

Scripture Reading: 2 Timothy 2:5, 20-26

Meditation†

The word fan, a shortened form of fanatic, comes from the Latin word *fanaticus*, meaning “inspired by a deity, frenzied.” That word derives from *fanum*, Latin for “temple.” The word’s use continues to be true to its etymology.

Brian D. Ellison

Reflection

When they keep cutting corners in training and competition, athletes who play in the most significant games will lose: “no one is crowned without competing according to the rules” (2 Timothy 2:5b). Discipleship is like that, Timothy learns: there are “rules,” boundaries beyond which Christian faithfulness is impossible. Harboring impure “passions,” relishing “senseless controversies,” and bashing your opponents are a few of them (2:22-25).

Geoff Bowden invites us to reflect on moral boundaries for our actions as sports fans. “Anticipating the big game, strategizing with other fans before the game, watching our team play well under pressure, experiencing the sense of unity with all of the team’s fans, celebrating after their wins, and even debriefing or complaining after their losses can be a blast,” he writes. But when it comes to being a fully committed fan in a partisan atmosphere, he wonders, “Is there a moral line that Christians should not cross?” Bowden offers this guidance for carefully judging each situation:

- ▶ *Our highest commitment is to Christ and those he loves, not to our sports team.* “We are to model God’s love, first and foremost, for others,” Bowden notes, by serving enemies as well as friends. In our deeds and words we are to proclaim the good news that the kingdom of God is at hand. This is why “we must not act or speak [as fans] in any fashion that places obstacles for others to hear the good news. If we preach service but only consume, we have muted the good news. If we preach justice but ignore the maimed and oppressed, people will not see the rule of God operate in our lives.”



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- ▶ *A sports event is like a theatrical play.* How can we serve our enemies if we ardently root for our team or player to win (and the other to lose)? Bowden suggests that a sports event is an “artificial” environment in which athletes and fans play specific roles. As fans, “we engage in the drama along with the players, and our passions should be restricted to the artificial confines of the competition itself. Our hostility toward the other team is contrived, a product of the artificial drama in which we engage,” he writes. “Outside the boundaries of the competition, our moral responsibilities to our opponents – the other team’s players or their fans – is to serve them in pursuit of the highest good. Inside the artificial drama, we do not suspend Christian ethics; rather, we clearly remember that the joy of the drama of competition is not the highest good, and must be subordinated to the highest good.”
- ▶ *In our sports enthusiasm, we should not undermine the higher goods of discipleship for ourselves or others.* The Apostle Paul’s admonition to care for those with a weak conscience (1 Corinthians 8:1-12) applies here. Bowden concludes, “We are free to cheer vigorously for our team at the game and let others know where our sporting allegiances lie, but when the opportunity arises to chide a referee or mock opposing players and fans (even if it is in the spirit of playful competition), we must beware of how others perceive our actions! Our highest moral obligation is to Christ and to the fulfillment of the ethics of his kingdom, and not loyalty to our team.”

Study Questions

1. Discuss some widely accepted fan activities that Christians should avoid. Why are these behaviors “over the line”?
2. For Geoff Bowden, how are sports events like theatrical plays? What does this imply about the ethics of being a fan?
3. Discuss Stephen Carter’s view that Christian fans should “try to create conditions in which the athlete with the greater skill and dedication is the one who will prevail, rather than adding to the opposing team the artificial impediment of our catcalls and jeers.” Do you think Jesus would wear face paint?

Departing Hymn: “Take My Life, and Let It Be” (vv. 1 and 3)

Take my life, and let it be consecrated, Lord, to thee;
take my moments and my days; let them flow in ceaseless praise.
Take my hands, and let them move at the impulse of thy love;
take my feet, and let them be swift and beautiful for thee.

Take my will, and make it thine, it shall be no longer mine;
take my heart, it is thine own, it shall be thy royal throne.
Take my love, my Lord, I pour at thy feet its treasure store;
take myself, and I will be ever, only, all for thee.

Frances R. Havergal (1873)

Tune: MADRID (Carr)

† Brian D. Ellison, “This is My Bratwurst, Broken for Thee,” *re:generation Quarterly* 7:3 (Fall 2001), available online at www.ctlibrary.com/rq/2001/fall/7316.html.



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Focus Article:

📖 Sports in the Christian Life
(*Sports*, pp. 19-27)

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Sports in the Christian Life

Sports, physical exercise, and recreational activity contribute to our development as spiritual beings composed of body and soul. Today as sports take on an increasingly large role in popular culture internationally, they are becoming a new field for twenty-first century Christian mission.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: 1 Corinthians 9:24-27

Responsive Reading:

God, we cannot race through this journey alone.

We need each **other**.

God, we cannot sustain ourselves throughout this race.

We need each **other**.

God, we cannot finish this race on our own.

We need each **other. Amen.**

Meditation

Part of the charm of sports is that they offer a compelling image of virtue – the spectacle of human talents channeled toward a goal. The apostle Paul naturally reached for that image when he called the congregation at Corinth to more virtuous living.

“Athletes exercise self-control in all things,” he observed, arguing that Christians should exercise a similar kind of discipline in their life together in pursuit of a different, “imperishable” kind of victory.

Reflection

A contemporary Christian perspective on sports should have deep roots in Scripture and tradition, writes Michael Kerrigan, C.S.P. The Apostle Paul used sports metaphors to explain the virtues of Christian disciples (see Galatians 5:7; Philippians 3:14; 1 Timothy 6:12a; and 2 Timothy 4:7). To describe our commitment to Christ, he combined images of running a race, boxing, and training for an athletic contest (1 Corinthians 9:24-27).

Early Christian theologians resisted two exaggerated viewpoints on sports in the ancient world. The Greco-Roman “cult of the body” promoted physical attractiveness and placated the pagan gods, but downplayed the spiritual significance of sports. On the other hand, a Gnostic tendency emphasized the spiritual by downplaying the significance of the physical body, seeing the soul as “trapped in a body and yearning to be set free.” In this context, Christians “stroved for an appropriate balance between the physical body and spiritual soul,” Kerrigan notes. “By the early third century Tertullian advised Christians to shun such athletic competitions altogether, but Clement of Alexandria coined a phrase to nuance a Christian understanding: ‘physical activity, yes; cult of the body, no.’” Later the Church criticized the increasing brutality of medieval tournaments. “Yet the idea that sport could be a useful means, under certain conditions, of achieving the overall education of the human person remained firm,” says Maria Aiello, a specialist in sports law.

Drawing on Scripture and tradition, Kerrigan highlights these features of a contemporary Christian perspective on sports:



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- ▶ *Our dignity as human beings is grounded in our being created in the image and likeness of God, a unity of body and soul. God gives each of us varying talents, including athletic ones, to develop in loving service to God and others.*
- ▶ *We must remember that the body is an instrument for a full human life, not an end in itself. For instance, when we try to “win at any cost,” we reflect a “cult of the body” that downplays the spiritual dimension of athletic competition.*
- ▶ *The discipline and personal sacrifices necessary for athletic success mirror Christian asceticism that teaches us “to deal positively with balancing human passions, intelligence, and will.”*
- ▶ *Sports can teach us, as athletes and fans, important life lessons about respecting honesty, integrity, and fair play, and developing skills for dealing with adversity.*
- ▶ *Sports can enrich the social dimension of our lives. “Learning how to play as a team member shifts the focus from ‘me’ to ‘we,’” notes Kerrigan. “Rather than individual success, the importance of contributing to a group effort is emphasized.”*
- ▶ *Nevertheless, our sports and athletic competitions are in need of redemption. Not only are we tempted to win at all costs, we tend to “commercialize sports so that athletes and spectators are reduced to commodities, exploited for financial gain (by team owners, corporate sponsors, and so on), and not respected for their human dignity.”*
- ▶ *Thus, athletic competitions are opportunities to witness to Christian faith. “Christian athletes must live ‘in the world’ of contemporary sports, but not ‘of that world,’” Kerrigan concludes. “Christian athletes can be role models of sportsmanship, fair play, discipline, and integrity.”*

Study Questions

1. In 1 Corinthians 9:24-27, how does the Apostle Paul deploy sports metaphors to describe commitment to Christ? What virtues of a disciple are highlighted in Galatians 5:7; Philippians 3:14; 1 Timothy 6:12a; and 2 Timothy 4:7? Do sports today still provide good analogies for faithful Christian living?
2. How did early Christians avoid extreme views – the ancient “cult of the body” and Gnosticism – on the body and sports? Are there similar views that we should avoid today?
3. “Sports are taking on an increasingly large role in popular culture internationally,” Kerrigan observes. “As a social phenomenon characterized by globalization and instantaneous Internet communication, sports can overcome social classes, cultural differences, linguistic barriers, and geographical boundaries among peoples.” Discuss how sports have crossed boundaries in recent decades. How does this international character of sports present new opportunities for Christian mission?
4. Discuss some ways of witnessing for Christ with integrity through sports. Consider some improper, manipulative, or unhealthy ways. What makes the difference?

Departing Hymn: “We Give Our All to Christ”

† “Good Sports,” *The Christian Century* (5 April 2005), 5.



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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)

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Christian Reflection

Center for Christian Ethics
Baylor University
One Bear Place #97361
Waco, TX 76798-7361
Phone 1-866-298-2325
www.ChristianEthics.ws

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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



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Robert B. Kruschwitz, the author of this study guide, directs the Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University. He serves as General Editor of *Christian Reflection*.

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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.

Appendix: Optional Lesson Plans for Teachers

For each study guide we offer two or three optional lesson plans followed by detailed suggestions on using the material in the study guide:

- ▶ An *abridged lesson plan* outlines a lesson suitable for a beginning Bible study class or a brief group session.
- ▶ A *standard lesson plan* outlines a more thorough study.
- ▶ For some guides a *dual session lesson plan* divides the study guide material so that the group can explore the topic in two meetings.

Each lesson plan is for a 30- to 45-minute meeting, with about one-third of the time being set aside for worship.

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.

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.

The Grace of Neighborhood Ballparks

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 3 and 4	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To reflect on how the built environment of sports – using professional baseball parks as an example – reflects who we are and helps shape who we become.
2. To discuss the intrinsic good of sports as “signals of transcendence.”
3. To consider how we should build sports complexes in order to enhance and help create good city neighborhoods.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 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 “Blest Be the Tie that Binds” locate the familiar tune DENNIS in your church’s hymnal or on the Web at www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with a Story

“A friend came to visit me from out of town, and we arrived early to see a night game at Wrigley from my regular upper deck behind-home-plate cheap seats,” writes dedicated Chicago Cubs fan and architect Philip Bess. “The weather was warm, the ivy on the wall was green, the active twilight sky was purple and orange and pink, Lake Michigan visible to the east was turning a steely gray, the grills were fired up on the rooftops across the street, the el-train would clatter past every five minutes or so, the teams were just about to begin play, and the ballpark and the neighborhood were working together like Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. And my friend, taking it all in, turned to me after a long silence and said, simply: ‘This is perfect.’”

Unfortunately this graceful “dance” between ballpark and neighborhood is increasingly rare as we replace neighborhood baseball parks with colossal structures that only wealthy suburbanites can afford to visit. What do the new coliseums reveal about our sprawling cities?

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 give the group discernment to see how the flawed cities we are building reflect the disorder of our lives.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Hebrews 12:1-3 from a modern translation.

Meditation

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

Reflection

Most of the contributors to the *Sports* issue have discussed the nature of sports, their role in our society, our

attraction to them as athletes and fans, and how they are forming (or deforming) our character. Philip Bess guides our Christian reflection in a new direction as he evaluates the built environment of sports in our cities. Since he is a Chicago Cubs fan and a stadium architect in the forefront of the New Urbanist movement, Bess focuses on the professional baseball “stadiums on steroids” built in America over the last fifty years. Encourage your group to discuss his ideas in relation to other sports as well.

You might extend this study by discussing a Christian perspective on the built environment more generally with these resources in the *Cities and Towns* issue of *Christian Reflection*: Eric O. Jacobsen, “The New Urbanism” (pp. 28-36); Lee Hardy, “Dysfunctional Cities: Where Did We Go Wrong?” (pp. 11-19); and Philip Bess “The Church Building as a Sacramental Sign” (pp. 74-82). For more information on New Urbanist architectural and urban design projects near you, see the Congress for the New Urbanism Web site (www.cnu.org). You can see Mr. Bess’s new urbanist baseball stadium projects at Thursday Associates (www.thursdayassociates.net).

Study Questions

1. In the meditation, Mark Galli describes the “signal of transcendence” in sports as a *kairos* moment, when “as spectator or player, one becomes childlike again, or experiences the grace of human excellence, or bonds with complete strangers, or feels as if *chronos* time—the slow march toward death—is suspended....” Encourage members to discuss whether they have experienced something like this as an athlete or fan.
2. Philip Bess names these flaws: (1) our ideals of ordered liberty and equality have been distorted by consumerism and individualism; (2) we value celebrity and privilege over virtue; (3) we believe we can escape life’s unpleasantness by moving away from the poor.

The first is seen in Major League Baseball’s “years of unjust and ruinous labor relations that entailed among other things: racial segregation until 1947; baseball’s notorious ‘reserve clause’ that bound players to the team that signed them for a year after their previous contract had expired; the 1970s rise of the Major League Baseball Players Association, arbitration, and free agency; collusion on the part of wealthy team owners in the mid-1980s; and four work stoppages in twenty two years, including an August 1994 season-ending strike by the then arguably equally wealthy players.” The second is seen in the scandal of players using steroids and other performance enhancing drugs. The third is evident in our building new baseball stadia in downtown “entertainment zones” rather than established or new neighborhoods. This reflects “the suburban cultural bias that cities are good places in which to be entertained, but only poor people and childless adults would actually live there.”

Do members see these flaws reflected in other professional or college sports?

3. Bess explains ten characteristics of a good urban neighborhood: it has a discernible center, is pedestrian friendly, has a variety of dwelling types, has stores and offices located at or near its center, has an elementary school to which most young children can walk, has small parks and other recreational facilities dispersed throughout, has small blocks with a network of through streets, places buildings close to the street, utilizes its streets for parking, and reserves prominent sites for civic buildings [e.g., for religion, government, education, the fine arts, or sports] (pp. 35-36). Small towns and traditional urban neighborhoods typically have most of these features; suburbs have few or none of them. These features create space for a human community that encourages walking and interaction among neighbors.
4. Rather than being a “stadium on steroids” surrounded by acres of parking, a neighborhood-friendly sports complex would have these features: contribute to the overall urban design, be located in a mixed-use neighborhood, be designed to fit into the existing site, function as a civic building with appropriate architectural embellishment, make cars adapt to the culture and physical form of the neighborhood, maximize the use of pre-existing on- and off-street parking (and distribute rather than concentrate any new required parking), create housing and shopping development opportunities in the vicinity of the ballpark, keep the ballpark footprint smaller and more neighborhood-friendly by locating non-ballpark specific program functions in buildings located adjacent to rather than within the ballpark (p. 36).

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.

Would Jesus Wear Face Paint?

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 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To review our behavior as sports fans.
2. To examine three guidelines for evaluating our fan behaviors from a Christian perspective.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 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 “Take My Life, and Let It Be” locate the familiar tune MADRID in your church’s hymnal or on the Web at www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with an Observation

In an essay on “Sports Mobs and Madness,” Yale law professor and novelist Stephen L. Carter has written, “The notion of ‘let the best person win’ is, I suppose, an old-fashioned one, but Christians are bound by an old-fashioned religion. Surely we sports fans best display our love of neighbor when we try to create in the stadium conditions in which the athlete with the greater skill and dedication is the one who will prevail, rather than adding to the opposing team the artificial impediment of our catcalls and jeers. True, there will always be a degree of home field advantage – we will always root harder for the team that has for so long commanded our affections – but there is a world of difference between buoying up one team and dragging down the other” (quoted in *Sports*, p. 65).

Carter is correct that there is a world of difference between enthusiastically supporting our favorite team and tearing down the opposing one, but is it always clear (in the heat of athletic competition) when we have crossed this moral line?

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 two group members to read 2 Timothy 2:5, 20-26 from a modern translation.

Meditation

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

Reflection

Geoff Bowden develops three guidelines for enthusiastic fan behaviors. First, the good things that we enjoy as

fans—winning, friendship with other fans, loyalty to a team or sport, and a sense of identity—must be ranked below our highest good, which is becoming fully human as we become like Christ in all of our activities. Second, we should think of sports events as artificial environments, somewhat like theatrical plays, in we play a role. This allows for favoritism toward our team and good-natured hassling of opponents as part of a “performance.” Finally, we should avoid fan behaviors (even those justified as part of a performance) which become barriers to others’ faithful discipleship.

Bowden’s defense of enthusiastic fan behaviors (within the guidelines above) is in some tension with Stephen Carter’s view that as Christians we should “try to create in the stadium conditions in which the athlete with the greater skill and dedication is the one who will prevail, rather than adding to the opposing team the artificial impediment of our catcalls and jeers.”

Study Questions

1. Encourage members to discuss wrong behaviors not only at sports events (use of foul language to intimidate players or referees, inconsiderate treatment of opposing fans, inappropriate taunting and jeering, interference with athletic play, encouraging false judgments about play, and so on), but also beyond the sports events (denigration or inappropriate teasing of opponents’ fans, preoccupation with sports talk, harboring anger or envy toward opponents’ fans, being vainglorious about the success of one’s own team or player, and so on). Geoff Bowden reminds us, “Jesus does not prep us to be successful in a competitive environment, to win at all costs, to dominate opponents. The opposite is true: he teaches us how to help others [including our enemies] survive.”
2. “In much the same way that patrons go to the theater to see a play, sports fans go to competitions to see players assume roles, act within the confines of a given set of rules, and engage in dramatic conflict. While we may know the outcome of a theatrical play or opera (because we have read the script), in sporting events the outcome is always unknown, which greatly heightens the sense of drama,” Bowden writes. As fans we are *participants* of a sort in the drama. “Our role is to love our teams and players because of their performances on the field of play, and not (usually) for the ways in which they live the rest of their lives. We engage in the drama along with the players, and our passions should be restricted to the artificial confines of the competition itself. Our hostility toward the other team is contrived, a product of the artificial drama in which we engage.”

The rules of fan participation allow or, even, encourage us (like an actor) to feel, say, and do things that we would not do in real life. Nevertheless, “outside the boundaries of the competition, our moral responsibilities to our opponents—the other team’s players or their fans—is to serve them in pursuit of the highest good. Inside the artificial drama, we do not suspend Christian ethics; rather, we clearly remember that the joy of the drama of competition is not the highest good, and must be subordinated to the highest good.”

Encourage members to examine Bowden’s analogy. Are there significant differences between sports and theater? Can we easily “turn off” the “artificial” fan behavior when we want to, or does it bleed over into the stadium parking lot, our place of work, our family life, our congregation, and so on? Are the nature of the “drama” and our roles as fans significantly different when we shift our attention from professional to college, high school, or children’s sports?

3. Stephen Carter believes it is permissible to “buoy up” one’s favorite player or team, but not to “drag down” the opponent. We may “root harder for the team that has for so long commanded our affections” in order to provide for them a “home field advantage,” but our role in the drama (to use Bowden’s analogy) is to create conditions in which the best athlete or team wins. Would Carter encourage as much enthusiastic “artificial” fan behavior as Bowden would permit?

Would Jesus wear face paint? Consider the merits of Bowden’s answer: “I think he would. But he would also walk that extra mile to show opposing fans and athletes that the importance of victory pales in comparison to the riches of the kingdom of 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.

Sports in the Christian Life

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 4	Questions (selected)

Teaching Goals

1. To examine the roots in Scripture and tradition of a contemporary Christian perspective on sports.
2. To review the Pauline use of sports metaphors to interpret and commend Christian virtues.
3. To consider how sports are becoming a new field for Christian mission.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11 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.

Begin with a Comment

Describing Pope John Paul II as “the ideal Christian spokesperson” on the topic of sports in the Christian life, Michael Kerrigan notes that he was an avid hiker, skier, and swimmer. He had a swimming pool installed in the Vatican and often slipped away for skiing vacations during his long papacy (1978-2005).

In an address to athletes in 1987, the Pope spoke with great warmth and understanding about sports as a window upon our nature as human beings. He said, “Sport, as you well know, is an activity that involves more than the movement of the body; it demands the use of intelligence and the developing of the will. It reveals, in other words, the wonderful structure of the human person created by God, as a spiritual being, a unity of body and spirit. Athletic activity can help every man and woman to recall the moment when God the Creator gave origin to the human person, the masterpiece of his creative work” (quoted in *Sports*, p. 23).

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 give the group discernment as you prayerfully study the role sports should play within our Christian discipleship.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Meditation

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

Reflection

This study, which highlights some of the resources in the Pauline epistles and church tradition for developing a contemporary Christian perspective on sports, might serve as a stand-alone overview of Christian reflection on

sports today. However, if you use it in conjunction with other study guides for the *Sports* issue, focus on some of the these elements in Michael Kerrigan's discussion that are not covered in other study guides: the internationalization of sports, opportunities for Christian witness through sports, or the need for a balanced view of sports that avoids the two extremes of denigration and adoration of the human body.

Study Questions

1. "Part of the charm of sports is that they offer a compelling image of virtue—the spectacle of human talents channeled toward a goal," we read in the meditation. In 1 Corinthians 9:24-27, Paul mentions self-control, for sometimes we must restrain our desires for pleasure in order to remain focused on more important goals. He alludes to staying focused on one's primary goal (like a long-distance runner) in Galatians 5:7 and Philippians 3:14; we might call this virtue perseverance through difficulties and distractions. The image of enduring (or, fighting through) difficulties recurs in 1 Timothy 6:12a and 2 Timothy 4:7.

These texts do not say that the *goals* of discipleship and athletic competition are similar. They claim that we need virtues of will power—like courage, patience, self-control, and perseverance—to remain faithful to our commitments in the face of difficulties and distractions.

2. Michael Kerrigan describes the Greco-Roman "cult of the body" as treating sporting events as "primarily ritual celebrations to idols. Developing the physical body, promoting attractiveness, and placating the gods were emphasized while the spiritual significance of sport was downplayed." Early Christian theologians resisted this view in two ways: they refused to elevate the ancient games to cultic significance, but they also emphasized the spiritual and moral effects of participating in and observing athletic competitions. They avoided an opposite Gnostic tendency to separate the soul from the body and devalue physical activity. While some theologians like Tertullian urged Christians to shun cultic athletic competitions altogether, Clement of Alexandria coined a phrase to nuance a Christian understanding: "physical activity, yes; cult of the body, no."

Are these two extreme tendencies present today? Kerrigan suggests, "The shortsighted view of 'winning at all costs' reflects a 'cult of the body' in which the spiritual dimension is downplayed with the primary emphasis given to immediate results to succeed." Members might mention that the emphasis today on physical beauty (even when it is athletic beauty) is not entirely healthy. Some sports events elicit extreme devotion from spectators, almost like a religious cultic ceremony. Archbishop Stanislaw Rylko writes, "sport has become, in every respect, a surrogate for religious experience. It is a paradoxical fact that, in our secularized society, sports events have taken on the character of collective rituals, fraught with emotion. Stadiums and gymnasiums are like temples to this 'new religion'" (quoted in *Sports*, p. 65). On the other extreme, we may be tempted like the Gnostics to reduce the gospel to "saving people's souls" rather than caring for their fully human lives, body and soul.

3. While he admits that "sports have been used in various ways to promote national ideologies, political agendas, and economic gain," Kerrigan thinks the *international* spread of sports has been positive. Baseball is popular in Japan, American football is catching on in Europe, and soccer is commonly played in the United States. Encourage members to discuss how sports can provide a common interest among citizens, immigrants, and travelers, and to consider the roles this cultural understanding might play in sharing the gospel.
4. Kerrigan says "Christian athletes [and fans] can be role models of sportsmanship, fair play, discipline, and integrity." They can stand up to pressures to "win at all costs" and to commercialize sports in ways that reduce athletes and fans to commodities. Ask members to describe coaches, athletes, and fans who have witnessed to Christian faith. Then consider some improper forms of witness, such as triumphal display of faith that suggests God's favor on a particular team, or "cashing in" on athletic celebrity with an immature witness before church groups, etc. How can your congregation help coaches, athletes, fans develop an authentic witness to God's love in Christ and resist self-aggrandizing religious behaviors?

Departing Hymn

"We Give Our All to Christ" is on pp. 56-57 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.

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.