

❖ Other Voices ❖

Think about this: *Sports Illustrated* sells as many copies in a month (13.2 million) as *To Kill a Mockingbird* has sold since its first publication. When a society's national newspaper (*USA Today*) allocates approximately one-fourth of its pages to sports; when the *World Almanac* devotes one-tenth of its pages to sports (more than allocated for business, science, or politics combined); when a new American history text for fifth graders treats the Depression and the presidency of Franklin Roosevelt in thirty-three lines, but devotes two pages to baseball star Cal Ripken Jr., it is fair to say that sport has a firm grip on our society.

SHIRL JAMES HOFFMAN, "TOWARD NARROWING THE GULF BETWEEN SPORT AND RELIGION," *WORD & WORLD* (2003)

Sports is simply a grace: a minor grace, but a grace nonetheless.... Sports relieves the weight of life. It satisfies, in an innocent way, our competitive urges. It reminds us, precisely in its 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 provides 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, "THE WEIRD WORLD OF SPORTS," *FIRST THINGS* (1998)

Sport does for some people what music or art does for others. It's not "just a game," any more than Van Gogh's *Starry Night* is "just a painting." The game, like a great painting, 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).

The mind reels at the image of Jesus trafficking with violent, self-centered, greedy athletes, immersed in an institution infamous for steroids, multi-million dollar contracts, trash talk, and indecent end zone celebrations. It's a scandal.

It's also the gospel. Indeed, if the grace and presence of God cannot be discerned in modern sports, then it will not be found in the modern world. No, sports does not bring us a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ, but like many other aspects of creation, it does allow us to touch the hem of his garment from time to time. And when that happens, it opens people up to considering a deeper dimension to life.

M A R K G A L L I , "THE GRACE OF SPORTS," CHRISTIANITYTODAY.COM (2005)

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.

B R I A N D . E L L I S O N , "THIS IS MY BRATWURST, BROKEN FOR THEE," RE:GENERATION QUARTERLY (2001)

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.

S T E P H E N L . C A R T E R , "SPORTS MOBS AND MADNESS," CHRISTIANITY TODAY 47:9 (2003), 70.

In many people's lives, sport has acquired an importance that goes beyond that of mere amusement or entertainment. For many of our contemporaries sport 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. And that is not all: 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"

Far from being used to achieve the healthy growth of the individual person, the practice of sport is increasingly threatening people; rather than directing them towards freedom, it is increasingly enslaving them, to themselves, to imposed fads and fashions, and to the [economic] interests which are concealed behind sports events.

A R C H B I S H O P S T A N I S L A W R Y L K O , PREFACE, THE WORLD OF SPORT TODAY: A FIELD OF CHRISTIAN MISSION (2005)

In America, from 1850 to 1900 liberal Protestants and a few evangelicals adjusted their theological and institutional commitments to the newly emergent attractions of organized sport. Roughly from 1900 to 1950, more moderate Protestants joined Roman Catholic, Mormon, and Jewish endorsements of sport. Finally, in the 1950s fundamentalist evangelicals baptized sport just as some American athletes started giving Allah the credit for knockouts and touchdowns.

WILLIAM J. BAKER, *PLAYING WITH GOD: RELIGION AND MODERN SPORT* (2007)

There is a sense in which [football] reflects a certain muscular type of Christianity that is going to be attractive to men. Where it can mislead is in giving the impression that God is always allied with the strong, the successful and the winners of the world, where in fact the Scriptures tell us that God often uses the weak to shame the strong

HENRY BRINTON, QUOTED IN MARK A. KELLNER, "GOD ON THE GRIDIRON," *CHRISTIANITY TODAY* (1999)

American muscular Christianity has been unable to confront the anti-Christian structures of big-time sports. At one level this has been inevitable, given the symbiotic relationship that has developed. Nevertheless, it is striking that muscular Christianity has largely avoided challenging the racist, sexist, dehumanizing, anti-academic and drug-permissive structures of big-time sports.

JAMES A. MATHISEN, "FROM MUSCULAR CHRISTIANS TO JOCKS FOR JESUS," *THE CHRISTIAN CENTURY* (1992)

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, they can amplify our understanding of ourselves as God's children in a genuine faith-revelation experience. Moreover, they 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, "TOWARD NARROWING THE GULF BETWEEN SPORT AND RELIGION," *WORD & WORLD* (2003)