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Of Interest To You

Engaging with the world of sport by J Stuart Weir

Rev Samuel Ashe, an 18th century English clergyman, clearly saw the need for interaction between church and sport. He used to spend his Sunday afternoons hiding in the trees by the local sports field. He would bide his time till the football came near him when he would catch the ball and pierce it with a pinⁱ. He could then go home pleased to have stopped his parishioners from sinning! Hopefully, in this article we can identify more constructive ways of engaging with the world of sport.

No reasonable person can deny the importance of sport in the modern world. The FIFA Football World Cup, which takes place every four years, is shown on TV in every single country and territory on earth, with 3.2 billion people around the world, or 46.4% of the global population, watching at least part of it last timeⁱⁱ. The Olympics in Tokyo this year – if they happen – will have similar world-wide appeal. Visiting a remote village in rural Togo, West Africa, without electricity or running water and seeing a child wearing a Manchester United replica shirt with Rooney on the back was a reminder to me of the global reach of the English Premier League. Something in the region of 15 million people in England participate in sport at some level according to a Sport England survey.ⁱⁱⁱ

Theology of Sport

Historically Christians from the Puritans onwards have had issues with sport. The traditional arguments against sport were that:

- Sport was not the best use of time;
- Sport often took place on Sunday;
- Sport was often associated with drinking, gambling and bad company.

While we no longer see it in such black and white terms, a tension still exists in the perceived lack of compatibility between the performance-based values of the world of sport and Christian belief based on grace and undeserved favour. The values of sport teach a person self-reliance and meritocracy; Christianity teaches that our only hope is to be found in God's love and mercy.

Christian ministry to sport largely began in the 1950s but has grown exponentially to the point where there are currently over 50 ministries with a specific engagement with sport in the UK alone. Some form of Christian ministry to sport exists in 180 countries of the world. However, the growth has been spontaneous and often unco-ordinated. This process has had certain consequences – for example in terms of theology.

Jim Mathisen, from Wheaton College, has written, "The fact that the current [sports ministry] movement still operates in the absence of any clearly articulated theology of sport is troubling...no theology or hermeneutics is broadly shared within the movement"^{iv}. While Mathisen's comment remains true in the sense that sports ministry still operates from no generally accepted common theological foundation, more and more material on sport and Christianity is being published at an academically respectable level^v.

The best book is *The Games People Play*, by Rob Ellis^{vi}, Principal of Regent's Park College, Oxford. Writing as an academic theologian with a love of sport who has conducted empirical research among sports players and fans, he is well placed to develop a theology of sport, rooted in the actuality of sport. The way he takes concepts based on play, salvation and sin and applies them to sport, arguing that participation in sport can be seen as a participation in God's playful creativity, is ground breaking.

Ellis' aim is stated as: "to explore the relationship between Christianity and the all-pervasive cultural phenomenon of modern sport. In so doing we will be examining theories which suggest, among other things, that sport has become a kind of surrogate religion in the twenty-first century. We will also be attempting to outline a theology of sport—that is, suggesting how sport might fit into our understanding of God's way with the world and our attempt to live godly lives in the world".

Elsewhere I have suggested that a Christian view of sport might see it as:

- a gift from God
- part of God's creation
- an opportunity for worship
- an opportunity to love one's neighbour
- a testing ground for our faith
- an opportunity for witness
- important but not all-important
- not the source of our significance as people

Grasping this truth about God as creator and redeemer must also affect our attitude to him. If he is the creator of all things, we have an inescapable obligation to worship him in all things and at all times.

This thought is well expressed in the words attributed to Eric Liddell, the 1924 Olympic gold medallist in the film *Chariots of Fire*, "God made me for a purpose, but he also made me fast and when I run, I feel his pleasure^{vii}."

There seems no reason why a piece of sporting skill should not bring pleasure to God, pleasure in something that he has created. Sporting ability is as much a gift from God as other creative abilities like singing, painting and writing and can, by his Spirit, be redeemed in order to be used in worshipping Him. Equally all God's gifts are capable of being used selfishly and for our own glory.

Competition

Sport lives by comparison. If I want to find out how good I am at a sport, I need to compete. I may think myself invincible as a tennis player on the basis of my school or village experience; entering my county or national championship may bring me quickly down to earth.

Imagine being marooned alone on a desert island – an island with a state-of-the-art sports centre – it would be very frustrating. What is the point of a tennis court, balls and a racquet if there is no one to compete against? In sport we need an opponent!

In *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, the novel which had so much influence on the development of Muscular Christianity in the nineteenth century, Tom says of the school match: "This is worth living for; the whole sum of schoolboy existence gathered into one straining, struggling half-hour, a half-hour worth a year of common life."^{viii} Anyone who has played competitive sport at any level will identify with these sentiments.

At the same time it seems that most Christians who play sport seriously have struggled to reconcile their competitiveness with their faith. Sport has been accused of bringing out the worst in us. The dichotomy is well expressed by Shirl Hoffman: "Belting another person around on a football field may seem an odd way to express your love to him or to the Almighty."^{ix}

But if we see our opponent, not as our enemy but as our neighbour, and moreover a neighbour whom Jesus tells us to love as ourselves, it certainly affects our attitude to that

opponent. We treat our opponent in the way we want to be treated: with respect. We want a fair game. We want a good contest. We want our opponent to push us to perform at our best. People often think that being loving and being competitive is an 'either or' but in this setting, love is to be competitive! The challenge, as John White puts it, is "to keep winning important, while raising the bar for character and godliness for those who desire to bring glory to God in competitive sports".^x That's why I not only can but must love my neighbour as myself in sport, since I understand God's desire that we please Him with our abilities and that we help each other to do so.

Worship

A recent article^{xi} noted how elite sports participants often perform religious gestures and many speak of their sporting performance in terms of their religious faith, including the assertion that it constitutes an act of worship. After examining the parallels between sporting activity and worship the authors concluded that "while the correspondence may not be complete or exact, there is good reason to take seriously the claims of elite athletes of faith that their sporting performance should be regarded as an act of worship".

Three elite sportspeople quoted in the article make the case well for how sport can be an experience of Christian worship. Cat Reddick Whitehill, retired US football international, says "Many people think church is the only place to worship God. But you can worship God no matter what you're doing. A soccer field is one of my favorite places to worship. Before the national anthem, I pray my performance will bring glory to God. Then the field becomes my church and playing to the best of my ability, a form of praise". Similarly, South African swimming Olympic gold medallist Penny Heyns says "I sensed God was saying to me, 'As you swim up and down this black line, this is your opportunity to worship me. Every single breaststroke kick and pull that you do is the same as raising your hands in church and praising me. I'll teach you to worship me through your talent.'" Shelly-Ann Fraser-Pryce, twice Olympic champion at 100m, expresses a similar sentiment: "When I run, the first thing I say is: 'I hope you are pleased with my worship' for running is my worship—my way of worshipping him because he has given me the talents".

Practical engagement with sport

Sports ministry broadly falls into two categories – ministry to sport and ministry through sport:

- Ministry to sport means serving sport in the name of Jesus; sports chaplaincy is a good example of this. The term 'Serving the people of sport' is also used. This is helping the (often) elite sportsperson to practise their sport christianly as well bringing church to them when competition stops them getting to a local Sunday service.
- Ministry through sport is seeing sport as an evangelistic opportunity. This might involve running sports events with an evangelistic purpose, starting a church sports team to draw in outsiders, operating a fitness centre for the community as part of the church's programme, or distributing leaflets or video material with a gospel message in the language of sport, often using the testimony of high-profile Christian athletes.

Sports ministry works at all levels and age-groups. The following vision statement of one UK ministry summarizes well the task that the majority of Christian sports ministry organizations are engaged in:

- **Christians everywhere** living out their faith in sports clubs and teams.
- **Churches everywhere** engaging with their local sports communities.

- **Sportspeople everywhere** having the opportunity to hear the good news of Jesus Christ^{xii}.

Sports chaplaincy^{xiii}

The chaplaincy programme at the London Olympics was arguably the most comprehensive ever conducted at an Olympic Games, with 162 chaplains accredited in three separate categories to serve the athletes and others in the Olympic Village, the workforce and volunteers and the media. This was an excellent example of servant-hearted Christians working with the Olympic Organizing Committee to add value to the event.

The chaplaincy opportunity was created by the foresight of the Bishop of Barking who had created the post of 'Church of England Olympics Executive Co-ordinator' five years previously. The person appointed, Duncan Green, described his journey of service to the Organizing Committee in a book^{xiv}.

Many professional football, rugby and cricket clubs in the UK have appointed a chaplain. Sports Chaplaincy UK estimates that there are 150,000 sports chaplaincy opportunities in the UK alone^{xv}.

Sports outreach

Local church sports ministry is well-developed in North America and is growing in the UK. Finchampstead Baptist Church built its main hall as a multi-purpose sports hall, to Sport England requirements so that it could be used for the service of the community during the week alongside its traditional Sunday purpose^{xvi}. Churches have run football teams, badminton sessions, keep fit classes etc to reach out to the community.

At the grassroots level, some Christian-based sports outreach projects are being recognised by secular sporting networks as valid forms of engagement through sport to tackle problems in society. A good example is the Ambassadors Fathers' Football project which won the Beyond London Innovation award for reaching out to support poor marginalised immigrant fathers in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets^{xvii}.

When the Africa Cup of Nations was held in Egypt in 2006, the organizing committee was short of volunteers. The Christian community rallied round and recruited the required help. A Christian leader was given the role of Head of Volunteers and a place on the organizing committee. He said afterwards, "It was an incredible opportunity that God gave to the sports ministry in Egypt, to be at the heart of such a big sports event. Ninety percent of the people I was working with - volunteers, organizing committee, government - were not Christians. But all of them knew I was from a Christian church. I believe this is real sports ministry - not just working in the church but taking the church outside".

The London 2012 and Egypt 2006 experiences show how an attitude of servant-hearted support for the organizing committee of a major sports event is often appreciated and can build bridges between the Christian community and the sports administrators.

Disability sport

At the 1992 Paralympics admission was free as the organizing committee did not think that anyone would pay to watch disability sport. In 2012 in London the Paralympics were virtually sold out for every event. The quality and the profile of disability sport have increased dramatically over the past few years. However, the Christian community has largely ignored

disability sport. In the UK perhaps two of the 50 sports ministries explicitly include disability sport within their programme of activities.

If the theological reflection on sport has been sparse, the Christian thinking about disability sport has been almost non-existent. There have been some recent publications which make represent a welcome contribution to the field^{xviii}.

Prophetic engagement

Christians have been criticized for failing to have any prophetic engagement with sport. Tom Krattenmaker,^{xix} for example, has lamented the lack of interest in issues like racism, exploitation of women, financial corruption or excessive violence in sport. It seems a fair criticism.

Over forty years ago, Frank Deford,^{xx} wrote a series of articles in *Sports Illustrated* in which he coined the phrase “sportianity”. In a damning indictment of Christians involved in sport, he suggested that sport had had more impact on religion than vice-versa^{xxi}. He bemoaned the lack of Christian voice against dirty play, cheating, racism or any other moral issue in sport^{xxii}. To quote John White’s cry from the heart, “Sport is too good to allow it to fade away without a serious attempt to bring positive change.”^{xxiii} While we do not have time to do justice to this point, the issue must not be neglected.

Taking it further

The increased application of theological reflection to sport is to be welcomed. However, it must be recognized that the process has only just begun:

- Ministry underpinned by a sound theological base will be stronger and hopefully more effective.
- Greater theological understanding will help Christians to interact positively with sports’ governing bodies and to serve them rather than appearing simply to want to use the sports event for their own purposes.
- It will also help Christians address and give leadership in relation to the ethical issues which pervade sport.
- Ministry which respects the integrity of sport without compromising the integrity of the gospel is likely to reap long-term fruit.

Conclusion

As we work to see sports fields of the world become cathedrals to the glory of God^{xxiv} there are perhaps four principles, to which we need to hold fast. We need to see our sporting talents and our relationships with our sports friends as gifts from God, to be developed and given back to him for his glory. Our identity is to be seen as who we are as part of God’s creation, not dependent on our sports performance. We need too to challenge the traditional view of winning and losing and see the aim of the competition as applying our talents to the best of our ability, to the glory of God, regardless of the outcome. Finally, we need to see our responsibility to transform sport to the glory of God.

J Stuart Weir, is director of Verite Sport. He supports Christians in elite sport and has written extensively on sport and Christianity. See www.veritesport.org

ⁱ Holt, Richard, *Sport and the British*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press) 1989, Page 39

ⁱⁱ www.fifa.com

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/22806853>

^{iv} Mathisen, Jim *A brief history of Christianity and Sport*, in Deardorff II, Donald and White, John (Ed), *The Image of God in the Human Body*, (Lewiston, NY, Edwin Mellen), 2008, Page 34

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- ^v For a list of the main books see <http://www.veritesport.org/index.php?page=topten>
- ^{vi} Ellis, Robert, *The Games People Play*. Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2014
- ^{vii} Written by script writer, Colin Welland, the line was not spoken by Liddell but is nonetheless often regarded as an authentic expression of his sentiment. Letter from Welland to J S Weir, December 2002.
- ^{viii} Hughes, Thomas, *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, (London: Walter Scott Publishing, 1857) Page 99.
- ^{ix} Hoffman, Shirl J, "The Sancification of Sport" *Christianity Today* 30(6), (April 4, 1986) Page 20
- ^x White, John and Cindy, *Game day glory*, (Tallmadge, OH: SD Myers Publishing Services, 2006).
- ^{xi} In Praise of God: Sport as Worship in the Practice and Self-Understanding of Elite Athletes, Robert Ellis and J. Stuart Weir, *Religions*, 15 December 2020
- ^{xii} www.christiansinsport.org.uk
- ^{xiii} For more details of sports chaplaincy see Parker, Andrew, Watson, Nick and White, John. *Sports Chaplaincy: Trends, Issues and Debates*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2016
- ^{xiv} Green, Duncan, *Sports chaplaincy at the Olympics and Paralympics: Reflections on London 2012 in* Parker, Andrew, Watson, Nick and White, John, *Sports Chaplaincy: Trends, Issues and Debates*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2016.
- ^{xv} <https://sportschaplaincy.org.uk/>
- ^{xvi} <https://www.finchampstead.com/>
- ^{xvii} <http://www.beyondsport.org/the-awards/entries/view.php?id=2226>
- ^{xviii} Parker, Andrew, Watson, Nick (editors), *Sports, Religion and Disability*, Routledge 2015, Watson Nick J, Hargaden, Kevin and Brock, Brian, *Theology, disability and sport*, Routledge, 2018.
- ^{xix} Krattenmaker, Tom, *Onward Christian Athletes (Turning Ballparks into pulpits and players into Preachers)*,. Lanham: Rowan & Littlefield. 2009.
- ^{xx} Deford, Frank, Religion in Sport, *Sports Illustrated* 44(16-18), (19, 26 April 1976, and 3 May 1976).
- ^{xxi} Deford, Frank, *Sports Illustrated* 44(18), May 3, 1976, Page 60
- ^{xxii} Deford, Frank, *Sports Illustrated* 44(18), May 3, 1976, Page 60
- ^{xxiii} White, op cit, Page 12
- ^{xxiv} This expression was, to my knowledge, first used by Cassie Carstens, former Chairman of the International Sports Coalition