

# Sport and Mission

Author: J. Stuart Weir, Executive Director, Verité Sport.



Rev Samuel Ashe was an 18<sup>th</sup> century English clergyman who 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 pin [1]. He could then go home rejoicing that he had stopped his parishioners from sinning! There are better ways for Christians to engage with sport.

There has been a dearth of theological reflection on sport [2]. From Tertullian [3] onwards through the Puritans [4], the Christian view of sport has tended to be negative.

Puritan opposition to sport might be summarized under three points:

- 1 Sport was not the best use of time;
- 2 Sport often took place on Sunday;
- 3 Sport was often associated with drinking, gambling and bad company. [5]

Steven Overman [6] argues that the Protestant Ethic is a significant influence on modern American sport. The Puritans saw play generally as time which could be better spent. Overman starts his book with four fundamental questions, one of which is: "Why do Americans feel guilty when they play for the fun of it?" [7] Overman suggests that John Calvin's ghost still haunts the sports arenas and the playgrounds. [8]

Overman uses a wonderful phrase "soap-swimming Presbyterians", which implied that recreational bathers took a bar of soap along so that time spent swimming was not time wasted.

The emergence of the Muscular Christianity movement in the nineteenth century saw Christians – but not really evangelicals – engage with sport. Thomas Hughes's novel, *Tom Brown's School Days*, published in 1857 certainly had great influence.

The evangelical view of sport in this period was generally negative, Bishop JC Ryle, (1816-1900) for example, had been cricket captain of Eton, triple Oxford Blue. He took 10 wickets v Cambridge in 1836. However he never played cricket after ordination. His attitude is summed up in his *Who's Who* entry which records his interests as "cricket until ordained [9]".

In Wales non-conformists were discouraged from playing rugby by the ghoulish warning that they were "kicking the head of John the Baptist". [10] There were remarkable stories from the Welsh revival of 1904 of a rugby team playing a game on the Saturday, going to chapel on Sunday and enough of the team being converted and convinced that playing rugby had no place in the life of the Christian, that the following Saturday's game had to be cancelled.

The book, *What the Book says about sport* [11], included a chapter "Towards a theology of sport", which started with creation, then the fall, judgment and redemption. It concluded that any theology of sport must include these elements.

Sport is...

- a gift from God
- part of God's creation
- an opportunity for worship

- an opportunity to love one's neighbour
- a testing ground
- an opportunity for witness
- important but not all-important
- not the source of our significance as people

Romans 12 includes a number of points which can be applied to sportspeople

12:1 - *A living sacrifice!* Having a body is essential if you are going to play. Offering our body to God as a living sacrifice doesn't mean that we are not to play sport but rather that we must play as people who have given our bodies to Jesus Christ.

Paul calls it your spiritual act of worship. We are called to give our bodies to God to please him, as an act of worship, a 24/7 lifestyle activity, including when we play sport.

12:2: *Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind,* Playing sport as people transformed by God rather than conforming to the world's standards is a challenge. Now that means representing Christ in your sport. You operate to God's standards, not the etiquette of the game around you. You cannot pull someone's shirt because everyone does it. That attitude is conforming to the world, not being transformed by God.

12:3 and 16: *Do not think more highly of yourself than you ought to. Do not be conceited.* The world of sport is riddled with pride. That it is a "me first" culture is almost inevitable in a world where identity is performance-based.

12:10: *Be devoted to one another in brotherly love* is such a brilliant description of team-sport. Being part of a team over a period of years, sharing the successes and disappointments creates a bond between people like very little else.

12:12 *faithful in prayer* George Bruder, in the nineteenth century, believed that no Christian could possibly go to the theatre. His argument was that the idea of praying about the theatre was quite ludicrous. How could you possibly pray, he asked, "Lord! Go with me to Covent Garden. Bless the actors, strengthen the dancers, assist the musicians, let us have a merry evening, and render the whole performance useful to my religious interest [12]". He was right in his belief that the Christian should not do anything that they could not pray about but, perhaps, wrong to think he could not pray about the theatre or sport.

12:16 *Live in harmony with one another... live at peace with everyone.* What a great summary of our attitude to the opposition and to the officials.

## **Sports Mission**

So how do you do sports mission? There is no one simple answer. It is easier to give examples than to define it.

### **Chaplaincy**

Chaplains are appointed to meet the needs of competitors at major sports events. It is a recognition that there is more to people than just the physical. At one event a leading churchman said, "It is good and right that our churches are setting a clear Christian emphasis during this World Championship. We are opening up space for God. It is necessary that sportsmen and women have the opportunity...to turn to God in prayer and share about their faith" [13].

The former Leeds United football club chaplain, John Jackson used to say: "I don't go into the football club to take Jesus. He is already there. I just go in case he needs an errand boy".

Simon Stevenette, tells the story of when he was chaplain to Swindon Town. They were in the play-offs at Wembley at a tense point when a man behind put his hands on Simon's shoulders and said "Reverend, pray". Simon told me "I explained that I did not think prayer worked like that. But in case I was wrong, I prayed. [14]"

### **Service**

In 2006, Africa Cup of Nations took place in Egypt. The sports ministry associated with the Kasr El Dohara Evangelical Church in Cairo approached the organizing committee and offered to serve the tournament. The committee was at first sceptical but when they were having difficulty recruiting volunteers, and the church was able to produce volunteers, their attitude changed. Maged, the leader of the church sports ministry, was given the role of Head of Volunteers and a place on the organizing committee.

Maged said, "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. 90% 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. Many found out about our camps and Kids' Games. Some heard my testimony [15].

It is a legal requirement in the USA that drinking water is provided at all sites where there are crowds. At the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City the Salvation Army offered to take responsibility for all the water distribution points at all sites. The Salvation Army also provides warehouse space for the packed lunches, that the Organizing Committee distributed to all volunteers on all sites each day.

### **Incarnational Ministry**

Laura Kyte from UK has just completed two years in Argentina, working with Latin Link on a mission placement under the "Strider" scheme. She is a good club runner and much of her time was spent in the local athletics club, training and competing - sharing her life and her faith with local runners.

Two European Christians have spent time in the Middle East, one as a basketball coach and the other as a professional footballer. Playing professional football is also a great model for

support raising! Kate Randle, a teacher from Cirencester, went to Zimbabwe with Crosslinks to work as a PE teacher and hockey coach.

There is a Christian based business which recruits and places sports coaches in countries which are closed to foreign missionaries. The coaches, by the way, all happen to be Christians!

Sometimes foreign missionaries find it hard to get to know people and to feel part of the community. Sport can help break down barriers and enable the foreign “missionary” to meet people naturally and even professionally.

### **More than Gold**

The London Olympics start later this month. More Than Gold [16] is the group which co-ordinates ministry among churches and agencies. The strategy includes

- 40+ resources to help Christians engage with the games;
- 3,000 mission team members from around the world serving in London;
- Athlete Family Homestay programme;
- Chaplaincy;
- Social Justice;
- Service;
- Community festivals.

### **Other models**

How do you share the gospel in Pakistan? There is an annual cricket tournament, where all teams are required to have a mix of religions [17].

In Togo Aime Agbovor runs a girls' football team, Amis du monde. He is football coach, life coach, pastor, evangelist, surrogate parent for 40 girls. [18].

Sports coaching is a widely used method of reaching out to young people [19].

Christian run gyms are very common in the USA [20] but also in India, where Steve's gym is clearly evangelistic in purpose while providing excellent facilities.[21].

### **Conclusion**

Bryan Mason argues that the biggest unreached people group in the world, is the group that plays, follows, reads about and watches sport. He continues “For the church to have no designated strategy for reaching this huge people group is at best ignorance and at worst folly” [22]. Is sport included in your mission plan?

### **Notes**

1. Holt, R Sport and the British, (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1989). Page 39.
2. For a review of material reflecting on sport theologically, see J Stuart Weir Theology of sport, an historical review: at [http://www.veritesport.org/downloads/Theology\\_of\\_Sport\\_An\\_historical\\_review.pdf](http://www.veritesport.org/downloads/Theology_of_Sport_An_historical_review.pdf)
3. Ballon, R B physical activity, (in EF Zeigler, ed, History of sport and physical education to 1900: Champaign, Ill., Stipes, 1973). Page 195.
4. Stubbs, P, Anatomie of Abuses, 1583, quoted in Brailsford, D British Sport, a Social History, (Cambridge, Lutterworth Press, 1998). Page 30.
5. Brailsford, D, Sport and Society, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press,1969). Page 132-3

6. Overman, SJ, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Sport*, How Calvinism and Capitalism Shaped America's Games, (Macon, Mercer University Press, 2011).
7. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Sport*, Page 3
8. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Sport*, Page 41
9. Loane, M, *John Charles Ryle 1816-1900* (London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1983)
10. Smith, D and Williams, G, *Fields of Praise : the official history of the Welsh Rugby Union 1881-1981*, (Cardiff University of Wales Press,1980), Page 6. See also Erdozain, D, *Revival as Cultural Spotlight: The Strange Case of Rugby Football and the Welsh Revival of 1904-5*, in *Revival and Resurgence in Christian History, Studies in Church History*, 44, (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2008)
11. Weir, S, *What the book says about sport*, (Oxford: BRF, 2000).
12. Bruder, G *Lawful Amusements*, (London Biggs and Co, 1805) Page 29
13. Dr Wolfgang Huber, the most senior Bishop in the German state church at the special worship service held in the Berlin Cathedral at the beginning of the World Athletics Championships August 2009. See also: Weir, S, *Space for God*, *The Times Online* August 21, 2009
14. Quotations from personal conversations with John Jackson and Simon Stevenette
15. For a fuller account of the ministry to the Africa Cup of Nations in 2006, see Daniels, G and Weir, JS, *Church and Sport in Deardorff, D II and White, J (Ed), The Image of God in the Human Body*, (Lewiston, NY, Edwin Mellen, 2008)
16. See [http:// www.morethangold.org.uk](http://www.morethangold.org.uk)
17. See <http://www.veritesport.org/?page=Pakistanj>
18. See <http://www.veritesport.org/?page=Togo>
19. Examples: <http://www.highersports.org/>, <http://www.aisint.org/>, <http://www.kicklondon.org.uk/>
20. <http://www.southeastchristian.org/?page=3770>
21. <http://www.stevesgym.com/about.htm>
22. Mason, B, *Beyond the Gold*, (Milton Keynes, Authentic, June 2011).

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Please Note: The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of Redcliffe College.