

Some Thoughts on Christianity and Sports

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Sports have become extremely important in the modern world. Political supremacy is often settled in the athletic field. Professional sports occupy an important number of hours of TV programming. Millions of people are involved in competitive leagues of all sorts. Christian individuals will constantly be involved in competitive sports in one way or another: participating, watching, listening to Christian athletes and even evangelizing and giving pastoral care to athletes.

Several authors have dealt with aspects of sports in modern life and Christianity, such as the conflict between the so-called “killer instinct” and Christian love and compassion, or sports competition as worship (Hoffman, S.J.: “The Sanctification of Sport”, *Christianity Today*, April 4, 1986), or worship of the human body (Vaux, K.: “How do I love ME?” *Christianity Today*, Sept. 20, 1985). Sometimes, these approaches look first at the sports phenomenon and then try to analyze it with the help of God’s Word, the Bible. But there is a further need to discuss, starting from some basic Christian truths, to what extent the Christian and athletic ideals are compatible; how sports could help modern men and women to be better Christians, and what kind of difficulties will normally be encountered by the Christian athlete.

How do Sports Support Christianity?

Being an athlete is not easy. The kind of patience and perseverance it takes to practice day in and day out for years, often without immediate reward, to get a gold medal, is not common. The true athlete follows all the rules in order to achieve his or her goal.

And it is not easy to be a Christian. The kind of righteousness and perseverance it takes to please God until the last day is available to us only because of God’s grace. Both the Christian and the athlete know very well what it means to fight patiently now to be glorified later. They know how to live wholeheartedly for a goal. Paul compares the Christian life to a race, but with a better prize in the end:

“Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air. No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.” (1 Corinthians. 9:24-27. NIV)

Every Christian should care for his/her body and be healthy (see Sirach 30:14-16), in order to better serve God. The body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, and God must be glorified in the body (see 1 Corinthians 6:19-20). In a time when sedentary life and stress are causing serious problems to a large percentage of the population, recreational and

competitive sports play a very important role, providing necessary distractions and physical stimuli needed to prevent cardiovascular disease, lower back problems, obesity, and other maladies related to sedentarism. Furthermore, the athlete tends to know better what to eat and how to care for his/her body, and many choose to do it.

Therefore, a Christian sees several advantages in practicing sports in a regular, disciplined way: it helps build the kind of character needed to be a good Christian, and it helps to care for the body the way God wants us to.

Where do Christianity and Sports Clash?

Where is my strength?

The elite athlete is characterized by his self-discipline and will power. He knows he can master his own body. He knows he is physically superior, and his will is stronger than most other people's.

But where is a Christian's real strength? Not in his youth (Isaiah 40:30), nor in his might and strength (Psalms 33:16-17); it's not in his greatness or popularity (Psalms 118:8-9). It is true that there is a physiological kind of strength that has to do with physical fitness, and another one with will power, but both are nevertheless limited by how much of them a person has at any particular time. The kind of strength and might which come from God have nothing to do with those mentioned above. They depend on the fear of God and trusting and hoping in Him:

“No king is saved by the size of his army; no warrior escapes by his great strength. A horse is a vain hope for deliverance; despite all its great strength it cannot save. But the eyes of the LORD are on those who fear him, on those whose hope is in his unfailing love, to deliver them from death and keep them alive in famine.” (Psalms 33-16-19. NIV)

If you are a Christian athlete you must avoid the temptation of thinking that victory depends only on strictly following a training routine, of thinking that you are in control of your life, of thinking that you, by your own means only, can jump one centimeter higher (see Matthew 6:27). The athlete must give everything he's got in order to win, but the less he relies on his own strength and the more he abandons himself in God's hands, the greater his might and victories will be (see also Isaiah 40:28-31 and 1 Maccabees 3:17-23).

A good Christian has a commitment to evangelize, to communicate the Gospel (the “good news”) to those around him. How many times have we heard athletes or singers say that their success is important in order to glorify God and have a greater impact when they preach? “I had promised that it would be for God's honor and glory, whether we won or lost. Of course the glory was better for God and me since we won, because the victory gave me a better platform from which to speak” (Roger Staubach, in Hoffman, S.J.: “The Sanctification of Sport”, Christianity Today, April 4, 1986). But many times, as their popularity grows, those athletes end up betraying the very essence of Christian life.

Where is the power for the proclamation of God's Word? Is it in the preacher's popularity or is it in God himself?

How important are Sports? Priorities

Athletes are used to giving priority to Sports before social life, rest, study, work, family, etc., and it is true that unless they do that, it will be very difficult to succeed. At the same time, God wants the Christian to keep his/her priorities straight. God is number one (Deuteronomy 6:4-5), and salvation should be everyone's first concern:

“(...) train yourself to be godly. For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.” (1 Tim.4:7b,8. NIV)

It is necessary to give everything to sports in order to achieve success, but there will always be injuries, sickness, and failure. Only the best will get the prize. And what is the prize? Is it worth all the effort? The athlete fights for a medal or money prize, but the Christian strives to receive an eternal reward. Should a Christian risk the latter in order to obtain the former? (See 1 Corinthians 9:24-25).

Idolatry?

Yes, idolatry. It is not necessary to go as far as the ancient times when people worshipped the stars or abominable figures of animals. Modern man worships his own body, forgetting that his body does not belong to him but to God (see 1 Corinthians 6:19-20), and worshipping the creature rather than the creator (see Romans 1:25). A good example is bodybuilding, where athletes spend endless hours in front of the mirror admiring the huge bulk they are developing. But it's not necessary to go that far. Any athlete who loves his body more than God (Deuteronomy 6:4-5) is an idolater.

“The blacksmith takes a tool and works with it in the coals; he shapes an idol with hammers, he forges it with the might of his arm. He gets hungry and loses his strength; he drinks no water and grows faint.

The carpenter measures with a line and makes an outline with a marker; he roughs it out with chisels and marks it with compasses. He shapes it in human form, human form in all its glory, that it may dwell in a shrine (...) he bows down to it and worships. He prays to it and says, ‘Save me! You are my god!’” (Isaiah 44:12-13, 17b NIV)

Let us observe the athlete carefully: he trains, practices, makes a good effort and perfects himself. He strengthens his muscles, improves his technique and focuses all his effort in his sport. And when he succeeds he looks at the mirror and says: “I am the best! This victory is all mine!” But his body is more fragile and demands more attention and care than any normal person's. He puts his trust in something vain that passes away.

Sports as Worship

Hoffman (op. cit., 1986) deals with the problem of sport competition and success as a form of worship, since many athletes “win to the glory of God”. *Worship* is often used in the Bible with a restricted meaning, related to *service* and *bowing down*. In order to please God, worship must meet several requirements: it must reflect a life dedicated to obedience and the service of God (see 1 Samuel 15:22-23; Micah 6:6-8). The worshipper must live in holiness (see Psalm 15), and be just (Isaiah 1:11-17). The Bible’s Old Testament is full of prescriptions for acceptable worship. Furthermore, the New Testament states that there is one way to worship God: in spirit and truth (John 4:21-24).

It is a little risky, therefore, to try to fit sports competition as worship. The use of the term *celebration* (notwithstanding that celebration is sometimes a form of worship) would be more appropriate. Although real competitiveness ought to be a characteristic of the Christian athlete, one condition should be met: the glory and praise should always be God’s, not the winner’s. This is very difficult because sport fans idolize their champions. The whole structure is built with a secular perspective. Olympic Games, for instance, are a celebration of man’s victory and great capacities. True Christian games would not award medals to the winners but would end with praise and adoration of God (see Acts 14:8-17). Maybe the successful Christian athlete should not accept any medals or trophies!

For the Christian

Humans have an interesting obsession with high performance, beauty and perfection; I guess it comes from being created in the image of God. How interesting, however, that the closer humans get to perfection, the more fragile they become! Must be that because of sin men and women are condemned to chaos and imperfection, and everything they do ends up being useless efforts to escape their reality. Only in Christ, at the end of times, will humans achieve true perfection, and there will never again be any injuries, or sickness, or aging, and personal records will always improve, and it won’t matter anyway, because we will be eternally in the presence of God (Revelation 21:3-4).

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.” (Hebrews 12:1-2. NIV)

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