

Competition as Relationship: Sport as a mutual quest towards excellence

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“Everyone has won and all must have prizes,” said the dodo in *Alice in Wonderland*.

If only it were that simple! The dodo’s statement raises issues of the relationship between competing, performing, winning and gaining a prize. Of course, generally in sport there is only one winner and only one gold medal awarded. However in events such as a city marathon, every finisher receives a medal to acknowledge the achievement of completing the course. So in that context the dodo is right!

Baron Pierre de Coubertin, founder of the modern Olympic movement, expressed it like this, “The importance of these Olympiads is not so much to win as to take part...The important thing in life is not the triumph but the struggle. The essential thing is not to have won but to have fought well.”ⁱ

Even in a traditional competition the definition of winning as first place may be too narrow. In an Olympic final there is only one “winner” in the sense of gold medallist, but there may be a greater sense of satisfaction for the runner who achieves a personal best and a national record, or for the runner ranked 20th in the world but who makes the final, than for the “winner” who finishes first in a performance well short of their best.ⁱⁱ

One dictionary definition of competition is “a game or race or other contest in which people try to win.”ⁱⁱⁱ The word comes from the Latin *com* and *petere* which has the root meaning of striving together. We will examine both aspects – striving against and striving together.

Competition is the basis of the capitalist economy. There is competition all around us – in business, in education^{iv}, in the job market and in the economy^v. This is particularly true in sport. Former US President, Gerald Ford has said “there are few things more important to a country’s growth and well-being than competitive athletics.”^{vi} George Orwell described serious sport as “war minus the shooting”^{vii}.

It is hard to find a sentence that better sums up the essence of sports competition than the following description of the school game from Tom Brown’s *Schooldays*, the novel which had so much influence on the development of Muscular Christianity in the nineteenth century: “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} Plato, of course, once said you can learn a lot more about an individual in an hour of play than in a year of conversation.

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 state championship may bring me quickly down to earth.

Equally it is by competing at county, state, national and international level that a player establishes a position in the pecking order. The essence of sport is to put your ability and skills on the line in competition with another – whether individually or as part of a team.

However, in sport the word “competitive” is also used negatively. The phrase “He is a real competitor” is often used of a child as a euphemism, meaning that he is bad loser, sulks, loses his temper and throws down his bat and gloves if he does not win!^{ix}

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!

Competition is therefore part of sport and part of our world but it raises issues for many Christians. Gary Warner succinctly expresses the problem which Christian sportspeople face: "There are few Christian athletes who do not struggle with their competitive nature."^x Elsewhere in the same book Warner says that his experience in sport has convinced him that as well as athletes, most coaches, parents and fans struggle with their competitiveness. Moreover, it is an issue on which the church has been relatively silent^{xi}.

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."^{xii} Hoffman quotes several successful sportspeople who believe that having no positive feelings for one's opponent is essential to achieving victory. Jimmy Connors' attitude is typical: "I don't go out there to love my enemy, I go out there to squash him."^{xiii}

A study at Yale indicated that successful competitors tended to view their opponents as temporary enemies. Those competitors, who tried to maintain an atmosphere of friendliness towards their opponents, were much less successful in competition^{xiv}. Hoffman's catchy subtitle of his paper, "Can the mind of Christ coexist with the killer instinct?" sums up the issue.

The tension consists in the perceived lack of compatibility between the performance-based values of the world of sport and Christian theology based on grace and undeserved favour. The values of sport teach a person self-reliance and meritocracy; Christianity teaches that man's only hope is to be found in God's love and mercy. The question of whether or not a Christian can survive in this world of competitive sport is at the heart of our study.

The tension between Christian values and sports values is summed up in the cliché "You are only as good as your last game". Sport has a performance based value system. Players get their identity from playing, being part of the team and performing in a way that the coach and the spectators will think well of them. Thus the player at the top of their game can easily become arrogant and base their self-worth on their good performances.

The problem is that the player who kicks the rugby team to victory one week can miss the vital kicks the next week and lose the game. And what does that do to the player's self-worth? If your self-worth is based on what people think of your performance, life will be a roller coaster.

That tension is well illustrated in two surveys by Christopher Stevenson of the University of New Brunswick. From his study of 31 elite athletes and the difficulties they experienced as Christians in the sports culture, Stevenson summarizes the problem: "the normative values of evangelical Christianity appear to have the potential to be oppositional to the normative values and expectations of the dominant sport culture."^{xv} The athletes in the survey loved their sport, valued the experience but struggled to reconcile the demands and expectations of the sport with their Christian faith.

Stevenson further identified five areas in which the Christians had problems: "(a) the importance of winning (b) the importance of social status (c) the relationship with the team and with the coach (d) the relationship with opponents (e) the expectations that others had of them as athletes in their surrounding social settings."^{xvi}

Stevenson also found a great variation in the behaviour that the Christian athletes found acceptable, with some having no problem with deliberately hurting an opponent.^{xvii} One Christian athlete called Bob told Stevenson, "I don't find anything wrong with trying to knock someone into the turf so far that they have to pull him out with a spatula."^{xviii} Some Christian players found that the culture of elite sport required them to be willing to do whatever was necessary to win the game and struggled with the morality of doing this. Many of the Christian athletes interviewed reported that they regarded various actions, which were clearly against the rules of the game as normative.

The athletes in the survey, according to Stevenson, dealt with the tension in one of three ways^{xix}:

- an intensified commitment to the dominant culture of elite competitive sport;
- an accommodation to the sports culture;
- a rejection of the sports culture.

Interestingly Jennifer Beller in her study of 285 college athletes in Christian Liberal Arts colleges concluded that they had "learned to compartmentalize this [their Christian value structure] belief structure during sports competition."^{xx}

Stevenson (and Dunn) also interviewed 20 players in a church (ice) hockey league about "the implicit paradox between the nature of the game and the practice of the Christian faith."^{xxi} The analysis revealed three types of player in the league – the consistent Christian hockey player, the struggling Christian and the nominal Christian. The first category (the consistent Christian hockey player) seemed to have little difficulty in applying Christian principles to their sport. The other categories were more ready to follow the norms of the hockey culture over the norms of Christianity.

In writing up his interview with Jason Robinson, (England rugby player and Christian) a sports journalist, Paul Kimmage, imagined the team talk before the game: "Put your bodies on the line. Put your mind on the line! There's nothing else after this. When that whistle is gone at the end, there is nothing else! They're arrogant. They think they're going to win. We'll take them down." The writer then imagines Jason thinking "What about 'Love thy neighbour as thyself'? What about 'Do unto others as you would have others do unto you'?"^{xxii}

The irony is that Kimmage in his light-hearted, tongue in cheek, article has expressed the dilemma exactly. The Christian player must put his body on the line and be as competitive as the rest of the team but, at the same time, love his neighbour. That is the essence of being a Christian in the cauldron of competitive sport.^{xxiii}

One of the most systematic studies of the subject was carried out by R Scott Reavely.^{xxiv} His aim was to: "construct a Biblical blueprint for thinking about competition by examining relevant Biblical passages and drawing conclusions that Christians can apply to their competitive situations."^{xxv} He surveys the Biblical material, the views of early church fathers, looks at some ethical issues and discusses some contemporary aspects of competition before considering practical implications for Christian competitors.

The conclusions that he reaches are these: "I am convinced that the case against competition is more compelling than the case for it. I would rather have been convinced otherwise. I am convinced against my will. Try as I might I cannot make a strong argument recommending that an individual voluntarily engage in competition". And "In the final analysis, competition and Christianity are compatible in that they share some character qualities...yet they also have some irreconcilable differences...Competition always tends towards foolish comparison. The tension will exist in every instance. We must be willing to withdraw at any time if we see our faith being compromised."^{xxvi}

We shall return to some of Reavely's arguments later. He feels that the issues which competition raises for the Christian are "irreconcilable". We shall argue later that reconciling the difficulties is not only possible but is the duty and responsibility of the Christian sportsperson.

Reavely, and he is not the only one,^{xxvii} seeks to find competition in the Bible. He refers to competition between husband and wife, a consequence of the fall, Jonathan and David potentially competing for throne, Jesus and John the Baptist, God and Satan in Job and Revelation, Christian versus Spiritual powers (Ephesians 6:11-12 and 1 Timothy 6:12) as well as Wisdom and Folly in Proverbs.

There have been attempts to link Biblical events to sports competition including Nelson Price's reference to the temptation of Jesus as the 'Wilderness Games' "which showed Jesus to be a competitor of discernment, diligence and dedication"^{xxviii}.

Others portray Jesus as a sporting superstar: "I firmly believe that if Jesus Christ was sliding into second base, he would knock the second baseman into left field to break up the double play. Christ might not throw a spitball but he would play hard within the rules."^{xxix} The film *Elmer Gantry* referred to Jesus Christ as "the greatest quarterback who ever lived."^{xxx} Dave Dravechy, pitcher for the San Francisco Giants, said: "If I could put Jesus Christ into my shoes he would be the most aggressive and intense performer on the field. He would win every time."^{xxxi}

As we seek a Biblical understanding of sports competition, our view is that none of these attempts to find competition in the Bible and then apply it to sport help us at all. They seem to be based on an inadequate view of Biblical interpretation. Reavely's comment that Paul never recommends competition^{xxxii} is true but begs the question: would one have expected him to pronounce on competitive sport, whether negatively or positively?

The temptation of Jesus and the testing of Job teach us significant spiritual lessons but their application to sport is much more tenuous. Similarly, speculation as to how Jesus would have played football or baseball does not take us any further in our quest for a Biblical view of sports competition.

There have been several studies of the athletic metaphors of the Pauline epistles^{xxxiii} and attempts have been made to justify sports ministry or develop a theology of sport. However, when Paul likens the Christian to an athlete in 2 Timothy 2:5, he is no more trying to write a theology of sport, than is he reflecting theologically on agriculture or war and peace when he compares the Christian to the farmer and soldier in the adjoining verses. As Hoffman puts it, "Paul could never have guessed that the metaphor he seized upon to make his point would have caused so much debate 2000 years later!"^{xxxiv}

Part of our problem with competition is that it often seems ugly and negative. The winning at all costs attitude is prevalent in sport with a motivation based on disrespect for the opponent.^{xxxv} "Sledging" or verbally abusing opponents during a game is rife in cricket. It is part of the build-up to a clutch game for coaches to insult each other.^{xxxvi}

Lumpkin and Stoll take the issue further: "What is the purpose of competition?' If the answer is "to win at all costs", then external intimidation is acceptable. However if the purpose of the competition is about placing an athlete's skills against another athlete's skills, then external intimidation is unacceptable."^{xxxvii} David Light Shields distinguishes between competition (which is fair) and "decompetition".^{xxxviii} We need to face the issue – is winning more important than the integrity of the sports competition?

There is no clear consensus on whether competition is good, bad or neutral^{xxxix}. RC Sproul makes a helpful distinction, “Sports are not inherently sinful. People are. We bring sin to sports.”^{xi} Warner quotes Lou Brock of the St Louis Cardinals, “Competition brings out the best in any person.”^{xli} However when I read this I was reminded of the line in the novel by Wilkie Collins, which expressed exactly the opposite view, “The essential principle of his rowing and racing... has taught him to take every advantage of another man that his superior strength and superior cunning can suggest.”^{xlii}

Jennifer Beller in her study college athletes noted that “research had established “that participation in sport...negatively affects moral reasoning and moral development” and concluded that while competition was neither good nor bad “the emphasis that we place on the winning to the exclusion of others that negatively affects moral reasoning and moral development.”^{xliii} It is our view that that the problems identified are not intrinsic to competition but arise more from our sinful human nature and from an unhealthy obsession with winning.

There have been long debates about whether sport develops character or just reveals it. Exploiting an opponent’s weakness while protecting your own is part of the game. As we shall see later, the more important point is our attitude and integrity in the heat of the competition.

We have seen that Christian sportspeople struggle with competitive situations in sport. The anecdotal evidence is supported by research studies. Christians do not find it easy to reconcile the values of their Christian faith with the demands of the world of competitive sport. We have also reviewed some of the attempts to apply the Bible to competitive sport and generally found them inadequate.

As we argue that the world of sport is an appropriate arena in which to live out the Christian life, we need to start with the Bible and begin to apply it to sport. Genesis is a good place to begin. Genesis contains in the first two chapters a magnificent account of the creation of the world. **“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth ... and God saw all that he had made and it was very good”**. Genesis 1:1, 31. God is the creator of every single thing in his world, which the story pronounces over and over again “was good”! This writing is meant to evoke praise and awe! If we understand this, our attitude to God will be transformed. We will realise that we must worship in all things and at all times.^{xliv}

Of course God did not create sport - people did. It wasn’t God who starting kicking a ball around. God did not create the games we play. Yet it was God who created people and made them able to run, jump, kick and catch, and with a desire to play and compete. Sport is simply organized play in which we can use these talents that God has given us^{xlv}.

God created athletes and gave them the ability to run and jump. But it is important to remember that God does not love an athlete any more on a day they win than on a day they lose. If, as an athlete uses their talents, their attitude is above all to please the God who made them, then God can rejoice in this particular aspect of his creation.

It is true that the world of sport can be a very godless place, but can’t all aspects of life be like this?^{xlvi} As an activity in which we can use the gifts and abilities God has given us, sport is as valuable and significant as any other human activity. Furthermore, it is absolutely true that within the world of sport that there are many opportunities for evangelism – which we should grasp with both hands – but that is not our sole justification for playing sport. Playing sport is as legitimate as any other human activity.

We have noted how sportpeople often seek their identity in their sports performance. Of course, the Christian player is inevitably caught up in this to some extent. They care how

their performance pleases others. They suffer the same highs and lows as the rest of the team. But, the Bible teaches that there is a better approach. The Christian player's self worth is not dependent on their sports performance but on the fact that God has made them.

In the Ten Commandments God is very strict in forbidding his people from creating any images of God (Exodus 20:4). The reason is because Genesis 1:26 has taught us that there is already an image of God in the world – people! The second commandment in Exodus 20 forbids creating any kind of object, for example a statue, picture or building and making it the place where we go to please God.

Pleasing God the creator cannot be restricted to a time or place when we stand before a statue, or an hour when we enter a certain building. Made in God's image, we are to rule on his behalf in all of his creation all of the time - 24/7.

What really matters in sport is not the public assessment of our performance but that we are responsible for pleasing God first and everyone else last! As Christians we should be playing for an audience of one. It is to please the God who gave us our lives and our ability to compete, made us in his image to rule on his behalf and under his authority and who knows our motivations when we play. We are ultimately to play for an audience of one.

Genesis chapter two pinpoints two very specific principles with reference to pleasing God, which must be applied to our sport. The first is how we use our talents; the second is how we develop our relationships.

Genesis 2:15 explains that the first way we are to please God is by using our talents, to be at work in shaping his world for him: **"The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it."** This is the work he has called us to do! If our sporting talents are a gift from God, then it follows that we are to use them to work for God's pleasure as we take care of that part of the world called sport. Our talent in sport is for his pleasure, and Paul elaborates on this in 1 Corinthians 10:31, **"so whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God,"** and in Colossians 3:23 where he writes **"whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men."**

The verbs used in verse 15 are "work", "take care of" and "cultivate". We are to have a share in God's creativity in cultivating his world. We were made to represent (or image) him in this by using of our creative gifts as an act of worship, to bring him glory. Think of the implications of that for our sport.

South African Olympic swimming gold medallist, Penny Heyns, firmly believes this: "Swimming has in some ways been my 'classroom' where God teaches me so much about his ability and [to have] faith in him. I love the sense of satisfaction that I get when I've done a swimming workout or race, and know that I gave my whole being and heart to God in every moment of the swim. It's the best worship I can offer him. I remember once before an important race I was so tired that I just thought, 'I am going to swim up and down and praise the Lord and worship him through my talents', hoping that I could just produce a half decent time."^{xlvii}

Tennis-player Nancy Richey became a Christian late in her career. She found it increasingly difficult to reconcile her competitive emotions with her new-found Christian faith. "When I stepped on to the court I felt I was in an isolated area and the Lord was outside of that area. I knew hating my opponent was not a Christian view." The problem was later solved when "she learned that tennis was 'an act of worship' and that she could worship God by trying to perfect her strokes on the court."^{xlviii}

As Christian players recognize that their ability to play sport is a gift from God, they will more and more want to use those talents to please him – simply because of who he is, the creator and Lord of the universe and the God who loves them so much. To offer one’s talents and abilities in this context is an act of worship. Christians should never be ashamed of being competitive and wanting to do their best provided that their motivation is to please and honour God rather than for their own praise.

Pleasing God is not judged by what anyone else says about our performance. Indeed, it is not even about the trophies we might win. It is doing the best we can with our talents that pleases God.

Coaches sometimes worry about the fact that a particular player has become a Christian, thinking that they will have lost interest in the game and lost their competitive edge. This is often based on a misunderstanding of Christianity – often on the part of the player. Dirksen suggests that two things that can make Christian sportsperson less effective - not understanding God’s purpose for their sporting talents, and feeling that sport is no longer so important.^{xlix}

Christian players need to understand that “**presenting their bodies to God as a living sacrifice**” (Romans 12:1), involves being the best and most committed player that they can be. No Christian who understands this should ever lose their competitive edge. Faith in Christ and the way Christians play sport should be a seamless process. To quote one of the all-time great women basketball players, Nancy Lieberman-Cline, “We wanted to beat everyone but we weren’t mean. We didn’t curse. We tried to set the right example because we were representing Christ.”^l

This attitude is also exemplified by some of the responses, Stevenson received from athletes who understood that they were competing for God: “I think Christ wants us to give 100%... True worship means giving one’s all” etc.^{li}

The Christian player who really understands what it is to use their talents for God’s glory should, rather, be the most committed player in the club because they have the fundamental privilege of doing it for the Lord who gave them those talents.

As Christian sportspeople we must be people who give of our very best in all circumstances, win, lose or draw. That means not being a quitter^{lii} and always trying to get the very best out of one’s performance. This is what taking care of the world of sport for God actually requires of us.

The second principle, which we identified in Genesis, concerns our relationships.

Genesis 1:26 makes it clear that we are created by a God who is relational:

Let us make man in our image, in our likeness.

We learn from the Bible that God is Trinity: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. God has never been lonely, apart from the defining moment in history when he voluntarily gave up his own Son to die on the cross for our sin. God is a relational and loving God. Humankind is made in his image and is therefore meant to live in relationship too.

This is why, “**It is not good for man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him**”
Genesis 2:18

The context in Genesis 2 is the marriage of a man to a woman, the most fundamental of loving relationships. However, the principle of our needing helpful and healthy relationships extends to all other human scenarios, from those amongst families and friends and extending to those on the sports field. We are to demonstrate and proclaim God’s image and

presence in all we do and, for us as sports people that must include our sport.

Another way of expressing this dual aspect of being God's representatives on earth in our talents and our relationships is Jesus' summary of the Ten Commandments in the Great Commandment, where Jesus tells his followers a great challenge. He said, **“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbour as yourself.” (Matthew 22:37-39)**

Applying the concept of loving one's neighbour to competitive sport is revolutionary. It involves loving the team mate who has taken your place in the team, loving the opponent who has just caught you with a cheap shot behind the officials' back. It involves loving the official whose mistake has just cost you the game.^{liii}

More work needs to be done on developing team sport as a model of Christian living. However this is not new as the captain of winning team in Tom Brown's school attributed the victory to the fact that “each of us knows and can depend on his next man better – that's why we beat 'em today.”^{liv} What an excellent description of loving one's team mate as oneself!

If Christian sportspeople see opponents, not as the enemy but as neighbours, and moreover a neighbour whom Jesus tells them to love as themselves, it certainly affects the attitude to the opponent. It is about treating the opponent in the way that we want to be treated: with respect. It is about wanting a fair game, a good contest. It is about wanting the 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 means being competitive!

With that understanding perhaps the way to love one's neighbour is to give them the hardest tackle one's body can produce – fairly and within the rules. By doing that one is forcing them to be the best player they can be. Similarly I need the opponent to nail me when I get the ball and to play the most brilliant tactical game they can so that I have to take my gifts and use them to the best of my ability against them. That is to love my opponent in the heat of the competition. It is wanting the best for your opponent, in order to get the best out of yourself. It is playing hard but not seeking an unfair advantage. It is as Frank Reich puts it, “A Christian athlete or businessman has in mind that part of his job is to bring out the best in his team-mates that surround him.”^{lv}

One of Reavely's arguments against competition is that it hurts relationships. However, Drew Hyland in his article, Competition and friendship^{lvi}, not writing from a specifically Christian perspective, argues that competitive sport has the potential to lead either to conflict and alienation or to friendship. He notes that we are often “at our most competitive while playing against a close friend” and that “this greater intensity enhances rather than diminishes the positive strength of the relationship.”^{lvii} Going back to the derivation of the word, he further argues for competition whereby “each participant achieved a level of excellence that could not have been achieved alone, without the mutual striving, without the competition.”^{lviii}

Hyland too sees friendship as a relationship where friends, rather than in his words “not hassling each other” are always pushing each other to be the best they can be. Thus he concludes that “the highest version of competition is as friendship” and that “all competitive play which fails to obtain this highest possibility, that of friendship, must be understood as a 'deficient mode' of play.”^{lix}

Two things may confuse us when we consider Jesus' teaching on loving our neighbour and apply it to the sports field, particularly with reference to the issue of loving our opponent – our understanding of ‘love’ and our mental picture of ‘opponent’. So much sport is coached

with the opponent as the enemy. You are not thought to be competitive unless you are swearing at the opposition all the time.

People often think of love as soft, meaning that we cannot be loving and competitive. If I love my opposite number does that not mean that I have to let her score? A good example of this is Reavely's: "Loving someone I have chosen to outdo certainly puts me in an awkward situation. To sacrificially love a rival as Christ loved us would require discontinuing the competition...To show kindness to a competitor almost requires that one call off the competition."^{ix}

This is the point at which we must challenge Reavely. If he is right Christians need not only to stop playing sport but also to stop doing business or entering politics as they will be obliged to allow their opponents to win every time! It is our view that Christian can and must stay in sport and face the tensions head on. As Warner puts it, "The challenge for the Christian competitor is to bring a higher quality of competition to the system."^{xi}

That is the crux of the issue we are addressing. Christians are to take God's world of sport and regain it for his glory. The world of sport, in Calvin's phrase should become a "theatre of God's glory"^{xii}. Christians are to be fully engaged in competitive sport, using their God-given talents to the full, giving 100% commitment to the contest. At the same time that commitment is to be given in a spirit of loving one's neighbour as oneself.

A good example of this attitude is Eric Liddell, whose 1924 Olympic gold medal win became the subject of the film *Chariots of Fire*, has been called the most godly man who ever lived.^{xiii} At the same time he was fiercely competitive. When fellow missionary, Kenneth McAll invited Eric, years after retirement, to go for a jog with him, Eric declined politely saying "when I run, I run to win. I will never jog, but I will go for a stroll".^{xiv} For Eric there was no dichotomy between being competitive and being a Christian.

The words attributed to him in *Chariots of Fire*, "I believe God made me for a purpose - for China - but when I run I feel his pleasure and to give it up would be to hold him in contempt. To win is to honour him,"^{xv} show a holy competitiveness in which Liddell felt at peace using his God-given sporting in worship of God. However, he never lost his desire to win.

There have been many examples of treating one's opponent with love in the history of sport. For example, Eugenio Monte removing the bolt from his own bob and giving it to the UK team whose bolt had broken in the 1964 Winter Olympics – ultimately sacrificing his own gold medal chance; or tennis player Nduka Odizor lending an opponent a pair of his grass court shoes before playing him in a tournament.^{xvi}

The Christian is to compete with three attitudes – that competitive sport, like everything else for the Christian should be an act of worship; that we are to love our neighbour (ie our team mate, opponent and the officials) as ourselves; and that as Christ's representatives we must play Christianly. What better arena is there in which to exhibit the love of Christ than sport, as players love team mates as themselves, as they care for each other and make sacrifices for each other?

Part of competing Christianly may involve a different attitude to winning. Grant Teall, former American Football coach, describes the word winning as "the most important in all the English language."^{xvii} With Kipling we need to learn to "meet with triumph and disaster and treat those two imposters just the same."^{xviii} This also reflects the approach in the school game in Tom Brown's schooldays where the reward ["a warm seat by the hall fire and lots of

bottled beer] was promised not for victory but “for him who does his duty in the next half hour.”^{lxix}

As Warner suggests Christians must challenge “the insanity of the win-at-all cost ethic”^{lxx} and reclaim the world of sport as part of God’s creation. For so many people the obsession with the result takes away the enjoyment of the preparation and the contest itself.^{lxxi} This in a way brings us back to the de Coubertin quote at the beginning with its emphasis on the struggle rather than the outcome. We must challenge the Lombardis with their cheap jibes, “Show me a good loser and I will show you a loser.” Jack Nicklaus was always a gracious loser – was he a “loser”?

Dean Smith, successful basketball coach at North Carolina, has an interesting perspective on winning: “Making winning the ultimate goal usually isn't good teaching... Our North Carolina players seldom heard me or my assistants talk about winning. Winning would be the by-product of the process.” Smith further explains that because so many things, which could determine the outcome of a game, were outside a team’s control – how well the opposition played, bad calls by officials, injuries, bad luck, that equating success with winning was unsatisfactory. Smith preferred to ask realistic things from his players. “A player could play hard. He could play unselfishly and do things to help his team mates succeed. He could play intelligently if we did the job in practice as coaches. We measured our success by how we did in those areas.”^{lxxii}

Accepting defeat as not the end of the world, and being content if to have given 100% for God, may be a radical concept. It is also how Christians need to express their Christian faith amidst the challenges of professional sport.

Over thirty years ago, Frank Deford^{lxxiii}, 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^{lxxiv}. He bemoaned the lack of Christian voice against dirty play, cheating, racism or any other moral issue in sport^{lxxv}. 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.”^{lxxvi} While we do not have time to do justice to this point in this chapter, the issue must not be neglected.

As we work to see sports fields of the world become cathedrals to the glory of God^{lxxvii} there are perhaps four principles, which we need to hold fast to. 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.

ⁱ Widund, Ture. “Ethelbert Talbot: His life and place in Olympic history”, in, *Citius, Altius, Fortius: The International Society of Olympic History Journal*, Vol 2 No 2, (1994) 11. What de Coubertin actually said was: “L’important dans ces Olympiades, c’est moins d’y gagner que d’y prendre part... L’important dans la vie ce n’est point le triomphe mais le combat. L’essentiel ce n’est pas d’avoir vaincu mais de s’être bien battu”.

ⁱⁱ See Dixon, Nicholas, “Winning and athletic superiority” and Delattre, Edwin J, “Some reflections on success and failure in competitive athletics”, in Morgan, William J, Meier, Klaus V, Schneider, Angela J, *Ethics in Sport*, (Champaign: Human Kinetics 2001)

ⁱⁱⁱ Oxford School Dictionary, Oxford University Press, 1994

- ^{iv} See Robinson, Donald, "Competition and the Bible", Journal of Christian Education, Vol 40, No 2 July 1997 on competition in Education but with no reference to sport.
- ^v See Kohn, Alfie No Contest, (Boston:Mariner Books 1992) for the argument that competition is not an inevitable part of human nature and that more can be achieved co-operatively.
- ^{vi} Ford, Gerald R, in Sports Illustrated, quoted by Warner, Gary, Competition,(Elgin, IL : David C. Cook, 1979) 9.
- ^{vii} Orwell,George, Shooting an elephant, I write as I please, 1950
- ^{viii} Hughes, Thomas, Tom Brown's Schooldays, (London: Walter Scott Publishing, nd) 99.
- ^{ix} Warner, 63
- ^x Warner, 87
- ^{xi} See The World of sport today: a field of Christian mission, (Vatican:Libreria Editrice Vaticana), 2006 for example 7, 131,136
- ^{xii} Hoffman, Shirl J, "The Sancification of Sport" , Christianity Today 30(6), (April 4, 1986) 20
- ^{xiii} Hoffman 18
- ^{xiv} Hoffman 18
- ^{xv} Stevenson Christopher L, "Christian athletes and the culture of sport: Dilemmas and solutions", Sociology of Sport Journal, 14, 241-262. (1997), 242.
- ^{xvi} Stevenson (1997) 243
- ^{xvii} Stevenson Christopher L, "The Christian Athlete: an Interactionist Developmental Analysis" , Sociology of Sport Journal 1991, 8, 362-379
- ^{xviii} Stevenson (1991) 247
- ^{xix} Stevenson (1991) 251
- ^{xx} Beller Jennifer M, Stoll, Sharon Kay ,. Burwell, Barbara and Cole, Jack,"The relationship of competition and a Christian Liberal Arts Education on moral reasoning of college student athletes", in Research on Christian Higher Education, 3, 1996, 110.
- ^{xxi} Dunn, R and Stevenson, Christopher L, "The paradox of the Church hockey league", International Review for the Sociology of Sport, 33, (1998), 131.
- ^{xxii} God's gift, Interview with Jason Robinson by Paul Kimmage, Sunday Times, 1 December 2002.
- ^{xxiii} A recent book which helps us in this task is, White, John and Cindy, Game day glory, (Tallmadge, OH: SD Myers Publishing Services, 2006). The book involves the development of "a curriculum to keep winning important, while raising the bar for character and godliness for those who desire to bring glory to God in competitive sports".
- ^{xxiv} Reavely, R Scott, A theology of competition, ThM thesis, Western Conservative Baptist Seminary, (OR), 1992.
- ^{xxv} Reavely 7
- ^{xxvi} Reavely 80 and 87
- ^{xxvii} Richard Leadbeater suggests that "the only competition the Bible does encourage is against sin and Satan", Leadbeater, Richard, Does God care who wins?, University of Birmingham BA dissertation, (2004) 41
- ^{xxviii} Price, Nelson, "Jesus the competitor", The Christian Athlete, (February 1976) 9-10.
- ^{xxix} Petersen, Fritz quoted in Flake, Carol, Redemptorama:culture, politics and the New Evangelicalism, (New York, 1984) 101
- ^{xxx} Flake 93
- ^{xxxi} See also Glass, Bill, Expect to Win, (Texas: Word Books 1981).
- ^{xxxii} Reavely 32
- ^{xxxiii} Caplet, Keith D, 1Corinthians and the athletic terminology of Paul, , MA thesis, Western Conservative Baptist Seminary (OR), 1981; Chiofalo, Peter D, The athletic metaphor and the role of self-discipline in sanctification, ThM thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1992; Henderson Jnr , Walter E, Paul's use of Athletic imagery, New Orleans Baptist Seminary, 1996; Weekes, Kendall M, The athletic and military metaphors of the Apostle Paul in the Philippian Epistle, ThM thesis, Western Conservative Baptist Seminary, (OR), 1994; DeVries, Carl E, Pauline athletic terminology, MA thesis, Wheaton College, 1944; Somerville, John T, A study of the relationship between athletic illustrations in the Pauline writings and the athletic backgrounds of the people visited by the Apostle Paul (40-60 AD), MA Thesis, East Carolina University, 1969; Vieselmeyer, Dean A, St Paul's application of athletic metaphors to the Christian life: an exegetical study of 1 Corinthians 9:24-27, Galatians 2:2, Phillipians 2:14-16, Phillipians 3:13-14, and 2 Timothy 4:6-8, MDiv, Concordia Theological Seminary, Springfield IL, 1974
- ^{xxxiv} Hoffman, Shirl, The Athletae Dei:missing the meaning of sport, Journal of Philosophy of sport (3 1976) 111-32
- ^{xxxv} See Stoll, Sharon Kay, Who says this is cheating?, (Iowa: Kendall Hunt, 1993) 2-3 on the tension between winning and playing ethically.
- ^{xxxvi} See Sports Ethics: applications for fair play, Lumpkin, Angela, and Stoll, Sharon Kay, (London: Mosley, 1994) 55ff on trash talking.
- ^{xxxvii} Lumpkin and Stoll 59
- ^{xxxviii} Shields, David Light, "Opponents or enemies: Rethinking the nature of Competition", Reflections, Council for Spiritual Education, (March 2002, Vol XIII, Number 2)
- ^{xxxix} For a good case for the lifelong relationships based on shared experiences of competition and the camaraderie of team sport, see Grisham, John, Bleachers,(London: Arrow 2004).
- ^{xl} Sproul, RC, Beauty and beast going for the crown, (Eternity. May 1987, 56).
- ^{xli} Warner, 68
- ^{xlii} Collins, Wilkie, Man and wife, (London: Chatto and Windus 1902), 178

^{xliii} Beller, Stoll, Burwell and Cole 102 and 110

^{xliv} For a fuller discussion of the doctrine of creation and its application to sport, see McCown, Lowrie and Gin, Val, Focus on sport in ministry, (Marietta, GA: 360 Sports, 2003) and Weir, Stuart, What the book says about sport (Oxford: BRF, 2000)

^{xlv} See Daniels, Graham and Weir, J Stuart, Born to play, (Bicester:Frampton House Publications, 2004)

^{xlvi} For an apologetic for a Christian view of sport, see Null, J Ashley, Real Joy, (Hanssler, Germany, 2004)

^{xlvii} Weir, Stuart, The Ultimate Prize, (London: Hodder 2004) 138

^{xlviii} See Weir, Stuart, More than Champions, (London:Harper Collins 1993) 54 and Nixon, Howard L.and Frey, James H., A Sociology of Sport , (Wadsworth 1995) 71

^{xlix} Firksen, Jay, "The Place of Athletics in the Life of the Christian", Sports Sociology Bulletin (4, Spring 1975) 53

ⁱ Hubbard, Steve, Faith in sports, (New York: Doubleday 1996), 190

ⁱⁱ See Stevenson (1997) 250-251

ⁱⁱⁱ Compare the perspective of Dean Farrer head of Marlborough, 1871-76 that the qualities of a good cricketer especially the self-control 'to play out tenaciously to the very last a losing game, ready to accept defeat but trying to the end to turn it into victory. Well, believe me, you want the very same good qualities in the cricket field of life'" Farrar, FW, "In the days of thy Youth", in Simon, B and Bradley, I The Victorian Public School, (London 1975) 148.

ⁱⁱⁱⁱ See Daniels and Weir 2004 29ff for a discussion of how to love one's team mate, opponent and officials

^{lv} Tom Brown's Schooldays, 110

^{lv} Reich, Frank, Created to compete, paper to CSRM Symposium, Atlanta, 2004

^{lvi} Hyland, Drew, "Competition and friendship", Journal of Philosophy of sport, 1978, 27-38

^{lvii} Hyland 27

^{lviii} Hyland 34

^{lix} Hyland 35

^{lx} Reavely 45-46.

^{lxi} Warner 84.

^{lxii} Calvin, John Institutes

^{lxiii} For example a funeral tribute "yesterday a man said to me, of all men I have known Eric Liddell was the one in whose character and life the spirit of Jesus Christ was pre-eminently manifested" Bryson, Arnold, quoted in Magnusson, Sally, The Flying Scotsman, (London: Quartet Books 1981) 174

^{lxiv} Warner 109

^{lxv} While this line was written by the script writer, Colin Welland, and is not an authentic quote from Liddell, it seems to sum up his attitude.

^{lxvi} For a full account of these stories, see What the book says about sport, 36 and 71.

^{lxvii} Teaff, Grant, Winning, (Waco: Word 1985) 11. Despite the promising title, the book does not make a great contribution to our study.

^{lxviii} Kipling, Rudyard, If

^{lxix} Tom Brown's schooldays 99

^{lxx} Warner 87

^{lxxi} For a good example of this see Warner's story of Tim Davenport. Warner 26.

^{lxxii} Smith, Dean, The Carolina Way, (New York: Penguin Books, 2004) 29. See also Marx, Jeffrey Season of life, (New York: Simon and Schuster 2003) for another account of playing competitively without an emphasis on winning and Osborne, Tom, Faith in the Game, (New York: Broadway Books 1999)

^{lxxiii} Deford, Frank, "Religion in Sport", Sports Illustrated (Number 44, 19, 26 April 1976, and 3 May 1976).

^{lxxiv} Deford, 60.

^{lxxv} Deford 102.

^{lxxvi} White 12

^{lxxvii} This expression was, to my knowledge, first used by Cassie Carstens, Chairman of the International Sports Coalition.