

Delighting in God's Good Gift of Sports and Competition

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Introduction

My growing up years, especially my time in secondary school, were consumed with sports and athletics. It assumed an idolatrous role in my life. I was not living as a follower of Christ and I served the god of sport. One of my goals in secondary school was to be the best athlete in the school. That goal was accomplished I guess. I enjoyed success in at least five different sports and in my senior year I was chosen as the athlete of the year. But that accomplishment also set into motion something else that would eventually take my life in a different direction. I began to see the vanity of it all. Seeing my picture hanging in the halls of my school, the honour accorded to the athlete of the year, made me realise that in ten years students would probably be mocking my haircut—shoulder length hair in keeping with the times!—in the same way we ridiculed the crewcuts of the 1960s. (This did happen, by the way, when my youngest sister attended the same school ten years later!) The recognition and honour accorded me from athletic success was certainly not something that would last; it was here today, gone tomorrow. As I stood at the threshold of the rest of my life the question ‘what now?’ began to arise in my mind. Would I pursue wealth, fame, what next? And what if I accomplished my goals again, would the satisfaction of that prove to be as fleeting and short-lived as success in athletics?

Several years later I was converted to Christ and my life changed. But the gospel which I embraced was a narrow, even world-negating gospel concerned primarily if not exclusively with a new relationship to God. Sports, athletics, and competition had little place for the committed follower of Jesus Christ in my understanding. Sacred activities such as prayer, worship, evangelism, and so forth were what really mattered. All other activities were secular—inferior, wasteful, and frivolous at best. I succumbed to what Shirl Hoffman calls a ‘degraded view of sport’ (Hoffman 1994:139). He quotes an article in the evangelical magazine *Christianity Today* as illustrative of this attitude: ‘Among the various things we can relax with, athletics are low on the scale of demonstrable religious significance’ (*Christianity Today*, 1972, 11 August, p.23).

I still remember the joy of discovery when less than ten years later I came to understand a much wider view of the gospel and fuller understanding of the Bible’s teaching on creation. The gospel was a gospel of *the kingdom*. That is, God is restoring his rule over the whole creation. It came through the reading of a number of books but it was especially Al Wolters’ *Creation Regained*. More specifically with respect to athletics an article entitled ‘Sports and Athletics: Playing to the Glory of God’ in the book *At Work and Play* liberated me from my diminished view of sport (Frey et. al. 1986). Seeing Jesus Christ as Creator and Lord, and understanding the gospel as a gospel of *the kingdom* opened up a new and liberating understanding. I was able to understand sports, athletics and competition as gifts of God in creation to be richly enjoyed with thanksgiving.

Earlier this year I saw a movie entitled *City of Angels*. In this movie Nicholas Cage plays a disembodied angel who falls in love with a woman. He finds out that it is possible for him to ‘fall’ from heaven and become a human being. He takes the plunge. There is a five or ten minute section in the movie when now as a man with a physical body, he begins to discover many of the delights of creation. He slowly savours

the moments taking delight and joy in the simplest pleasures. He tastes the sweetness of fruit for the first time; he lingers as he smells the pleasant aroma of perfume; he pauses to enjoy the sensation of hot water in the shower; he delights in the embrace of a woman. He takes the time to soak in the joy and delight of these new experiences. Sadly he enjoys the gifts of creation but does not acknowledge the Giver. Yet I was rebuked as I realized how easy it was for me to take for granted the many gifts of God's creation or to simply enjoy them with little thought of the Giver.

As Christians our thinking must always begin with the gospel. John 3:16 may be a good starting point: God loved His creation so much He sent His Son to salvage it through his death. God pronounced His creation 'very good' in the beginning. He continued to love it even after sin twisted and deformed it. As creatures we have been given a rich and diverse life and each part is to be received as a gift from God's hand. Paul says: 'For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving . . .' (I Timothy 4:4). The contemporary testimony of the Christian Reformed Church entitled *Our World Belongs to God* puts it this way: 'We serve Christ by thankfully receiving our life as a gift from his hand' (par. 46). God is good, the creation He fashioned is good, and He delights to give us many things to enjoy, and he wants our thankful and loving response.

This can be illustrated from my experience as a Father. In the last four or five years I have travelled often. One of the favourite and delightful parts of my life is returning home. We all sit together as a family and I tell them about my trip. Part of that experience is to give them gifts I have purchased for them in my travels. As a Father I delight to give these gifts to my children. I relish their pleasure in the gift, take pleasure when they joyfully thank me for them, and tell me that they love me. So it is with God! As a Father He delights to enrich the lives of His children with manifold good gifts in his creation. He delights for us to discover and enjoy them, to turn to Him in thanksgiving and gratitude, and tell Him that we love Him. I believe this to be an essential dynamic in what it means to be God's child. This is, I think, at the heart of God's creational intent for humanity from the beginning.

I submit that sports and competition must be included as those good gifts that God has given to us. It delighted God to give them; He created the potential in the creation for humanity to discover, develop, and enjoy them. He delights when we receive them as gifts, honour Him in our use of them, and thank him for them. The ascetic and dualistic spirituality of my early years as a Christian that diminished sports, while cloaked as zealous commitment, was in fact simply ingratitude for one of God's good gifts. It also denied God the pleasure he has in giving and the delight He experiences when his children find joy in His goodness. The movie *Chariots of Fire* has it right. Eric Liddell said 'God made me fast. When I run I feel his pleasure. . . . it's not just fun. To win is to honour him.'

Once after I offered a seminar on worldview I was approached by a phys. ed. teacher who asked me how what I had just said shaped his subject. I asked him if he was an athlete. He replied that he was. I then asked him 'what is it about sports, athletics, and competition that delights you?' He was able to quickly and joyfully rattle off a number of things. I suggested to him that as a Christian phys. ed. teacher an important part of his calling was to foster in his students an attitude of delight and thanksgiving that joyfully acknowledges sports, athletics, and competition as good gifts of God. I also asked him how sin had corrupted this good gift and how Christians might again embody God's good design over against this corruption. Again he had good answers. I suggested that if he could develop this in his students he would be a good and faithful servant. I want in the rest of this paper to reflect especially on the first issue: that is, sports and competition as good gifts of God.

The whole area of sports, athletics, and competition is rooted in creation in two ways. First, it is rooted in how God has created us as human beings. Second, it is rooted in the calling he gave us in the beginning to enrich our lives.

Sports and competition finds its source in who we are as God's image. God has created us in His image with a diversity of functions and abilities. In my relatively brief exposure to literature on sports and leisure I have seen a number of proposals, both explicit and implicit, about what aspect of our humanity athletics can be grounded in. The two that make most sense to me is the social and imaginative.

God has made us to be *social* creatures, to develop and enjoy a diversity of relationships that enrich our lives. Our lives are enhanced by a plethora of human relationships. Out of this soil has grown various ways human beings enjoy one another in social intercourse, including play, leisure, and competitive interaction.

God has also made us to be *imaginative* creatures. As Bart Giammatti put it, sport is 'part of our artistic and imaginative impulse' (Giammatti 1989:38) or alternatively Arthur Holmes, part of our 'aesthetic potential' (Holmes 1981:47). We are able to creatively construct imaginary worlds into which we enter for a time. Drama, literature, and poetry are examples. These imaginatively constructed worlds bring us delight, new experiences, and fresh ways of viewing the world. The world of games, sports, and athletics is one way we construct an imaginary world with goals, rules, and obstacles. Entering into this created world for a time can enrich our lives in various ways.

Sports and athletics flow from the kind of creature God has created us to be. Sports 'feed a deep human hunger', not because it is somehow religious as Michael Novak has suggested, but because it corresponds to the way God made us (Hoffman 1994:139).

Sports and athletics also grow out of the calling God gave humanity in the beginning, the so-called creation or cultural mandate (Genesis 1:26-28; 2:15). Humanity was given the delightful task of exploring, discovering, and developing the potential God put in the creation in loving communion with Himself. God's gift of sports was not given, of course, fully developed on a platter. The garden of Eden was not equipped with squash courts and baseball diamonds! Squash racquets and baseball bats did not grow on the trees. Rather God gave humanity formative power to explore, discover, and develop the potential of the creation in diverse ways. It is out of this foundational task that sports and athletics has arisen as one cultural product.

God's Good Gift of Competition

I think many would be able to agree that sports and athletics are gifts from God. Perhaps fewer would agree further that competition is a good gift from God. In my recent trip to Australia I found that a number of Christian schools had a 'no competition policy' for their playgrounds and athletic programs. Marvin Zuidema expresses the views of some in the Christian community about competition this way:

'Competition is morally wrong because it pits one player or team against another in rivalry which often results in hate' (Zuidema 1994:185). Yet surely Zuidema is correct when he counters that competition is a 'basic ingredient' of sports and athletics and that 'no one can play responsibly to lose' (Zuidema 1994:184, 185). Indeed the very nature of sports and athletics demands competition as an essential component. To eliminate competition is to destroy the very created nature of sport.

John Byl places the activity of 'successfully overcoming unnecessary obstacles' at the heart of his definition of sports, and athletics (Byl 1994:157). Various obstacles serve as *necessary* hindrances for one to enjoy the activity of sport and athletics. 'Obstacles provide hindrances which prevent the player from using the most efficient way of accomplishing the goal. The joy in the game is in creating tactics to overcome the obstacles and accomplish the goal' (Frey et. al. 1986:46). Competition is when a team or

individuals agree to co-operatively oppose one another given the stated goals, rules, and obstacles of the game. In other words, rivalry is not at the heart of competition, co-operation is—co-operative agreement on the goals and rules of the game, and the co-operative desire to oppose one another (*ibid*). Competition can enhance the joy and emotional intensity of whole athletic experience; competition can sharpen one's skills and produce satisfying physical exertion; competition can refine and improve the quality of the whole aesthetic or social experience. Thus an opponent is not first of all a rival but one who provides the opportunity for a more delightful experience of sport. Competition is an enriching part of God's gift. One loves one's neighbour in sport by providing stiff competition to enhance the athletic experience. I believe many athletes can resonate with Zuidema's statement that 'competition can bring out co-operation, celebration, respect, and even love' (Zuidema 1994:185).

Yet it has to be recognised that competition, like sex, is a very powerful impulse that, because it has been twisted by sin, can easily turn ugly. It is necessary, therefore, to discern what healthy and normative competition is. Perhaps the most important thing that can be said here is that 'human' obstacles are not simply hindrances like a barbell in weightlifting—they are not simply objects to be overcome. Human beings are created in God's image and therefore in the heat of competition must always be treated as such—with love, dignity, respect, and appreciation. Just over two weeks ago I visited the site of the 2000 Sydney Olympics in Australia. In the observation tower that surveys the whole site they have pictures of athletes with quotes. The majority of quotes showed this violation of the creational intent of competition. 'I don't care who I'm playing. I want to win more than they do' said one. 'Intimidation is the key. You can have the other beaten before they hit the water' said another. The great football coach Vince Lombardi's comments also express this distortion and violation of competition: 'Winning isn't everything; it is the only thing'; 'To play this game you must have fire in you, and there is nothing that stokes fire like hate.'

Sports, Athletics, and Competition As One Part of God's Good Creation

Sports, athletics, and competition are good gifts given by God to His children. Yet these gifts must be received in certain ways if they are to remain good gifts. In other words, there are certain conditions of use if they are to be experienced as good. I mention two. The first is that sports and athletics must be seen as one part of the symphony of creation. An orchestra is made up of the differing sounds of many instruments all contributing to a single harmonious symphony. Human life in God's world was originally created that way.

This illustration implies, in the first place, that sports, athletics, and competition have their own 'sound' and part to play in the symphony of creation. Sport and competition is one valid (and good) God-given activity in life alongside of other valid (and good) God-given aspects of life (Spykman 1994:53). Athletic activity is a unique part of the creation given by God and therefore has its rightful place in God's world. Unfortunately Christians have not always recognised this. There are attempts to justify sports and athletics because they serve some more noble utilitarian purpose. Hans Rookmaker used to say 'art needs no justification.' What he meant was that art is a good part of the creation given by God and can simply be enjoyed for its artistic beauty without any other utilitarian purpose. So it is with sports and athletics; it needs no justification. It is a good part of the creation and can bring delight as a gift of God. It does not need to be justified because it brings physical fitness, refreshment for work, psychological release, builds character and self-discipline, is a bridge for evangelism and so on. These all may or may not be valid. (In fact some of the ways sports are used for evangelism, even proselytism are, I believe, invalid. See Frey 1986:55, 56). In any case they are incidental and not needed to justify the existence of sports and athletics. Their existence is justified because God gave them as gifts to enjoy. As Shaughnessy puts it: 'Essentially

sport has no purpose at all: it is an end in itself . . . Its possible uses are incidental, like those of the fine arts, religion or friendship' (Shaughnessy 1977:180). If God gave it as a gift for human enjoyment it has its part to play in the diversity of human life.

The illustration of symphony further implies that there is an organic connection between athletics and other aspects of God's creation. Creation is harmoniously inter-related. There is a physical, emotional, economic, social, aesthetic component (among others) in all athletic activity. On the one hand, this means that play suffers when other aspects of creation are weakened. John Byl says that play 'is best realized when personal conflicts have been resolved' (Byl 1994:157). For John social and psychological harmony is an essential condition for sports. There are many other conditions as well. Can you imagine a competition where the athletes could not count, where they did not have the physical fitness to last longer than five minutes, or where they were incapable of any emotional expression? Could sports develop in a culture where economic conditions required people to spend all their waking hours making a living or where dishonesty abounded? On the other hand, other dimensions of our lives suffer when play is weakened. Just this week I spoke to a man I used to play squash with. I asked him if he was playing squash. His response was that work made him too busy for any play. I suggested that the rest of his life would suffer if he didn't make time and his response was that he already recognised that.

The symphony metaphor also highlights two potential dangers. When the sound of any one instrument is too strong or too weak the whole harmony suffers. It is possible for the sound of play and leisure to become too weak, where sports are depreciated. I think here, for example, of two dualisms that have degraded sports and athletics—the sacred/secular and body/soul dualism. The sacred/secular splits God's interwoven and unified creation into two categories—sacred and secular. Sports are slotted into the inferior sphere of secular activities that are at best inferior and frivolous. The body/soul dichotomy sees sports and athletics as belonging to the body—the inferior part of man. Hoffman offers an example of this: ' . . . games are things of the body, and thus of a lower order than things of the spirit' (Wilson 1987:5). Both of these dualisms are rooted in pagan idolatry and ultimately corrupt an integral Biblical understanding of creation, with sports as one valid God-given aspect of human life.

The other danger in any symphony is when any one instrument becomes too loud and destroys the harmony. When one part of creation is idolized and enlarged beyond its proper place the harmony of creation is destroyed. This kind of idolatry is clearly seen in sports and athletics in the hedonism of our day. Charles Prebish identifies sport as the fastest growing religion in America far outdistancing whatever is in second place (Prebish 1984:318). And when we absolutise sports we forfeit the delight it can bring. George Bernard Shaw commented that an eternal life of leisure is like a perpetual holiday, which he wryly notes, is a good working definition of hell! The contemporary testimony *Our World Belongs to God* observes that 'pursuing pleasure we lose the gift of joy.' As Gordon Dahl puts it: 'In truth for millions of Americans—hard-working Americans—leisure has come to mean little more than an ever more furious orgy of consumption. Whatever energies are left after working are spent in pursuing pleasure with the help of an endless array of goods and services. . . It offers men the choice of either working themselves to death or consuming themselves to death—or both' (Dahl 1971: 187). Pursuing athletics with an idolatrous abandon does not allow us the joy of receiving it as one of God's good gifts. In fact, idolatry brings death.

Conforming to God's Created Design

Sports, athletics, and competition are good, then, when seen as one valid part of God's creational symphony. But secondly they are good when they conform to God's creational design. Athletics is a unique creature. It is only when we understand and embody God's good creational design for athletics and

competition that we can see it is as 'good.' The Bible calls this wisdom. God's wisdom is seen in the order and design He established in creation. Human wisdom is when we conform ourselves to that order and design (Wolters 1985:25-28; Bergant 1984:3-6). This order is discovered as we experience that order in the fear of the Lord (Isaiah 28:23-29). In the same way that we seek to understand the creational structure and order of marriage or emotions so that we might increasingly become wise and conform ourselves to God's design for marriage and emotional response, so we need to struggle to understand the creational structure and order of sports and competition so that we might more and more conform to God's original design.

Theoretical reflection can make a contribution to this task: '... academic inquiry into what is going on in our play is both legitimate and important. It can be helpful in deepening, enriching, and broadening our critical insight into recreational practices. It can help to account for leisure time habits. In so doing, it can also help in correcting and reforming this dimension of life' (Spykman 1994:54). That is why this kind of conference is important. In the same way that sociologists might make a contribution to understanding the creational design of marriage or psychologists to emotions, so there is a need for scholars to study this important areas of life to deepen the Christian community's understanding of God's original intent for sport.

Of course, a big part of understanding God's creational design for sports and competition will be to understand how sin has corrupted and polluted them. No athletic contest simply embodies the goodness of God's original design. Exploring God's creational design will mean becoming sensitive to those cultural spirits and idols that have perverted sport: a win at all costs mentality, sport driven by idolatrous economic forces, a hedonism that elevates athletics to the highest good, and so on (Frey et. al. 1986:51-56).

Delighting in God's Good Gift of Competitive Sports

In my own life competitive sports has played an important role. It has enriched my life immeasurably. I took the question I posed to the phys. ed. teacher and asked myself, 'what is it about sports, athletics, and competition that delights you?' The following is a partial list. Probably the more devoted you have been to competitive athletics, the more you will be able to resonate with the following.

There is an unmatched *emotional intensity* that accompanies competitive athletics. Wide Wide World of Sports used to speak of 'the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat.' Any athlete or serious spectator understands that well. Zuidema notes this along with other things: 'Athletes know the beauty of intensity of effort, the motivation of pursuit of goals, the feeling and being of fitness, the expressiveness of movement, the creativity of play, the excitement of total involvement, and the joy of sport' (Zuidema 1994:184). There is an emotional intensity way out of proportion with the importance of the event. As Huizinga puts it sports is 'not serious' yet 'at the same time absorb[s] the player intensely and utterly' (Huizinga 1950:13). The player is 'absorbed in serious pursuit of a non-serious activity' (Frey et. al. 1986:43). The intensity of disappointment one feels in the loss of an important game or match is experienced acutely because one is so deeply absorbed, yet it is soon forgotten. So it is with the intensity of joy that comes with victory. And this joy and emotional vibrancy spills over into the rest of life. As Johnston has put it: 'Play relativizes our "over-seriousness" toward life, filling us with a spirit of joy and delight that carries over into all aspects of our existence' (Johnston 1983:48).

There is an immense *physical satisfaction* that comes from stretching oneself to the limit and finishing a match exhausted and physically spent. There is a certain joy and contentment that athletes know that comes with demanding physical exertion. I will often flop down after a hard match with the words, 'that was good.'

A *social bonding* takes place in competitive sports. I offer two examples. In my own university one

person I have grown close to as a friend is John Byl, someone I play squash with more than any other. What is interesting is that there are few other social times where we get together outside the squash court. Yet a bonding has occurred that can be attributed almost exclusively to our games of squash. Another example comes from my recent trip to Australia. One of the teachers in my class was a phys. ed. teacher named Neal Francis who was also a very good squash player, a good couple of notches above me. During that two week period we played squash three of four times. Those times again brought about a bonding that exceeded any other relationship I had with others in the class. Others in the class were more verbal and intentional in engaging my attention during class on course content; there were also other delightful social occasions with others, such as dinner. But that time of competitive struggle served to form a quick friendship.

Competitive athletics brings about an *aesthetic enjoyment*. There is something that captures you in the creativity and unpredictability of each game. There is also something joyful about ‘that perfect play.’ I often find myself rehearsing in my imagination that perfect squash shot right along the wall that dies in the corner or the take-down in wrestling perfectly executed and impossible to defend or that perfect throw to second base that catches a base stealer who got a great jump. Competition sharpens skills in an iron-sharpening-iron effect. And there is an occasional glimpse of beauty experienced in a well-executed play that brings an aesthetic enjoyment that one wants to savour. Or one can dream!

There is finally a *religious deepening* that can take place as well. We are all created differently. Different parts of God’s creation bring joy to different people. My wife, indeed my whole family, can take such delight in the beauty of music. I enjoy music but it does not touch my soul in the same way and bring me delight the way that competitive athletics can—both as a participant and spectator. I’m sure my wife simply can’t understand that. (When we play ‘competitive’ board games like Scrabble, she wants to help everyone. She has little incentive to win herself.) Quite simply we are wired differently. I believe these different aspects that naturally bring delight (music for my wife, competition for me, and so on) can and should be opportunities for a religious deepening. What I mean is this: we are created to respond to God in joy, thanksgiving, love, and praise as we receive the whole of our lives as a gift from His hand. Those things that especially bring delight can be occasions that remind us of this fact, and opportunities to return to God the thanksgiving and praise that is due for every part of our lives.

Nothing Matters But the Kingdom But Because of the Kingdom Everything Matters

There is a well-known song that goes like this: ‘Turn your eyes upon Jesus. Look full in his wonderful face. And the things of earth grow strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace.’ That song used to characterize my life. If I turned my eyes upon Jesus sports and athletics would grow strangely dim; they wouldn’t matter much any more. I no longer believe that! I like that song and so I have changed the words and this is how my family now sings it: ‘Turn your eyes upon Jesus. Look full in his wonderful face. And the things of earth *take their rightful place* in the light of his glory and grace.’ That is because the Jesus we turn our eyes upon is Creator, Redeemer and Lord. With that vision, sports, athletics, and competition take their rightful creational place.

Years ago Gordon Spykman began a convocation address at Redeemer with these words: ‘Nothing matters but the kingdom’—and he paused letting its truth sink in, and then continued—‘but because of the kingdom everything matters.’ As a new Christian I had the first part down but I’m afraid I did not understand that the second must necessarily follow. Indeed, on that final day nothing will matter but the kingdom of God. ‘Only one life ‘t will soon be past; only what is done for Christ will last’ is a little poem that my grandmother wrote—ironically—on the inside of an autograph book that she gave me to collect

autographs of pro athletes. That poems sums it up—nothing matters but the kingdom. However, since the kingdom narrated in the gospels is God’s power in Jesus Christ by the Spirit to restore *all* of creation to again live under his liberating rule, that means *everything* matters. Sports, athletics, competition matter because Christ created them and is restoring them to again conform to his rule. When we stand before the judgement seat of Christ only gold, silver, and precious stones will last through the fire of God’s judgement (I Cor. 3:12-15). I used to believe that included only evangelistic or ethical works and the like. Now I believe there will be athletic acts of gold and silver that will last. Spykman, making reference to Revelation 21:24-26, rightly says: ‘The treasures of the nations will go into the new Jerusalem. Among those treasures, I believe, is good, sound, healthy leisure’ (Spykman 1994:58). I would add good, sound and healthy sports. May we receive the gift of sport with thanksgiving, praise God for His goodness, and conform our athletic lives to God’s design so that on that final day we hear ‘Well done good and faithful servant.’

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