

EVERY SQUARE INCH

THE CREATIONAL GOODNESS of SPORTS and COMPETITION



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— *Gordon Spykman*

BY MICHAEL
W. GOHEEN

THE GOSPEL AND A DEGRADED VIEW OF SPORTS

My growing-up years were consumed with sports, especially while I was in secondary school. Without exaggeration, sports assumed an idolatrous role in my life. I was not living as a follower of Christ; I served the god of sports. One of my goals in secondary school was to be the best athlete in the school—and that goal was accomplished, I suppose. I enjoyed success in at least five different sports, and during my senior year, I was chosen as my school’s 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 early 1960s. The recognition and honour I received from athletic success would not last; it was here today, gone tomorrow. As I stood at the threshold of the rest of my life, I began to ask, “What now?” Would my next accomplishment prove to be as fleeting and short-lived as success in athletics?

Several years later I began to follow Christ, and my life changed. But the gospel which I embraced was a narrow, “world-negating” gospel concerned primarily, if not exclusively, with a new relationship to God. Sports and competition had little place for the committed follower of Jesus Christ, in my understanding. Sacred activities such as prayer, worship, and evangelism were what really mattered. All other activities were secular—inferior, wasteful, and frivolous. I succumbed to what Shirl

“GOD CREATED US TO BE IMAGINATIVE—GOALS, RULES AND OBSTACLES ARE CONSTRUCTS OF DELIGHT.”

Hoffman calls a “degraded view of sport”, an attitude expressed in an article in an evangelical magazine in the early 1970s: “Among the various things we can relax with, athletics are low on the scale of demonstrable religious significance.”

I still remember the joy of discovery when 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: God is restoring his rule over the whole creation. Seeing Jesus Christ in cosmic proportions as Creator, Lord, and Redeemer opened up a new, liberating understanding. I was able to understand sports and competition as gifts of God in creation to be richly enjoyed with thanksgiving.

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.

Once, after I offered a seminar on worldview, I was approached by a physical education 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 asked, “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 physical education 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 help his students view and embody sports in these ways he would be a good and faithful servant.

Here, I will consider sports and competition primarily as a good gift of creation. Much could also be said about the way sin has twisted sports, but that is not my primary focus in this article.

THE FOUNDATION OF SPORTS IN CREATION

Sports, athletics and competition are rooted in creation in two ways. First, they are rooted in how God has created us as human beings. God has created us in his image with diverse functions and abilities God has made us as social creatures who develop and enjoy many different, life-enriching relationships. Therefore, human beings enjoy one another in social intercourse, including play, leisure and competitive interaction.

God has also made us to be imaginative creatures. Sports are part of our imaginative impulse or aesthetic potential. 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

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for a time can enrich our lives in various ways.

Second, sports and competition also grow out of the calling God gave humanity at the outset of history—the creation 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; footballs and hockey sticks 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 have 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. Fewer, perhaps, would also agree that competition is also a good gift. On a 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.” 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.” Indeed, the very nature of sports and athletics demands competition as an essential component.

To eliminate competition is to destroy the created nature of sports. Rules of a particular sport create obstacles to prevent the competitor from accomplishing the goal of the game in the most efficient way. The joy comes in creating

tactics to overcome those necessary obstacles to accomplish the goal. Competition involves a team or individuals agreeing to oppose one another, given the stated goals, rules, and obstacles of the game. In other words, rivalry is not at the heart of competition; cooperation is.

Competition can enhance the joy and emotional intensity of the entire athletic experience, sharpen one’s skills and produce satisfying physical exertion, and 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. Competition is an enriching part of God’s gift.

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 barbells in weightlifting—mere 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.

Sports and competition are good when seen as one valid part of God’s creational symphony. The metaphor of symphonic music highlights two potential dangers. When the sound of any one instrument is inappropriately strong or

weak, the whole harmony suffers. Where sports are depreciated, it is possible for the sound of play and leisure to become too weak. I think here of two dualisms that have degraded sports and athletics: the sacred/secular dichotomy, and body/soul dualism. When one part of creation is idolized and enlarged beyond its proper place, the harmony of creation is destroyed. This kind of idolatry of sports is clearly seen in the hedonism of our day. 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.

Sports and competition is good when it conforms to God's creational design. Only when we understand and embody God's good creational design for sports and competition can we see it is as good. The Bible calls this *wisdom*—God's wisdom is seen in the design he established in creation, and human wisdom comes when we conform ourselves to that order and design. This order is discovered as we experience the creation as though taught by God (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.

DELIGHTING IN GOD'S GOOD GIFT OF COMPETITIVE SPORTS

Competitive sports have played an important role in my own life. They have enriched my life immeasurably. I asked myself, "What is it about sports, athletics and competition that delights

me?" In response, I offer the following delights to be drawn from sports and competition.

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. A *social bonding* takes place in competitive sports between athletes. In my own experience, I often form the closest friendships with the people with whom I compete. Competitive sports bring 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 that one can savour. For some, there is a *religious deepening* that can take place as well. We are all created differently and take special delight in different parts of God creation. Those aspects of creation we especially enjoy can bring an opportunity to stop and thank God for all his good gifts in creation. It is a gratitude that can spill over into all of life.

Gordon Spykman has said it well: "Nothing matters but the kingdom, but because of the kingdom everything matters." As a new Christian I had the first part down pat, but 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 'twill soon be past; only what is done for Christ will last" is a little poem that, ironically, my grandmother wrote on the inside of an autograph book that she gave me to collect autographs of professional athletes. That poem sums it up. Nothing matters but the kingdom. However, since the kingdom told about 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, it means that everything matters. Sports and 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 (1 Corinthians. 3:12–15). I used to believe that included only evangelistic or ethical works. Now I believe there will be acts of athletic gold and silver that will last.

A Christian witness in sports will minimally involve receiving the gift of sports and competition with thanksgiving, praising God for his goodness, and conforming all of our lives to God's design. Then, on that final day, we will hear about our athletic involvement, "Well done, good and faithful servant."



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