

The Current Craze

As in perhaps no more conspicuous way, the hiss of the evil one reverberates (II Cor. 4:4; I Jn. 5:19; Jn. 14:30) in the collective consciousness of contemporary society through the popular obsession with sports of all kinds. Parents run their children to little league practice, groups of aspiring youth hone their competitive skills on the sand-lot, conversations are abuzz with the latest scores, statistics, and successes of the favorite team, as a large percentage of American society lives from one game-day or event to the next. For multitudes, the thrill associated with a winning season, capturing a championship, or simply witnessing the pomp and pageantry of game day, has become their very impetus for life. One writer expresses his own idolatrous fascination in these words:

Sport is somehow intertwined in the roots of me....Mention the Detroit Tigers or Lions, and my pulse quickens. Let the Tigers mount a modest winning streak. I await the score on the evening TV sports. I devour the box score next morning. With every Detroit win, life seems just a little better.¹

The fact that this fixation on sports has, to a greater or lesser degree, infiltrated Christendom and has sapped its devotional fervor just as assuredly as Samson's dalliance with Delilah severed his spiritual strength, is even more alarming. Church softball teams abound across the landscape of the American religious scene. Far from being discouraged and disallowed, the average church assumes and accepts the fact that its membership has a "healthy" interest in sports. And what is worse, with few exceptions, American church members see absolutely nothing contradictory between sports participation and the practice of discipleship. This despite the fact that the ethic of competition, with its associated self-assertion, strife, rivalry, and pride, contravenes the Christian ethic at a number of points.

The Controverted Ethic

Glorying in their ability to shoot a basket, pass a football, or trot around the track faster than anyone else, athletes are in danger of becoming proud, vain, conceited, and full of self-love.... How can a truly sanctified soul care for the shallow admiration of the fickle worldly crowd?... Surely only a proud, unholy heart could be tickled by such vanities.²

Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves—Phil. 2:3.

Contests invariably involve competition between two or more parties who pit their individual skills against each other, and gauge success in terms of besting their opponent.

For a Christian to put himself forward in such a way reveals a profound self-interest and self-esteem that is utterly incompatible with the Gospel command to "walk worthy of the calling wherewith [we] are called with all lowliness and meekness" (Eph. 4:2). The highminded assumption that our skills or talents are better than our neighbors' betrays an attitude of prideful presumption rather than the spirit of servanthood that is to characterize the Christian's every endeavor (Matt. 20:26,27). Such comparisons are unhealthy (II Cor. 10:12) and can only lead to contentious rivalry and inward frustrations toward those that the Bible tells us to in honor prefer (Rom. 12:10). Would anyone dare to assert that a competitor in any contest is seeking to prefer and promote the interest of his opponent? And indeed, how can the Christian view any fellow human being as an "opponent," when Jesus commands us to love our enemies, bless those that curse us, do good to those who hate us, and pray for those who persecute and despitefully use us (Matt. 5:44)? The competitive desire to out-run, out-jump, out-score and out-do an opponent is therefore at variance with the meek-spirited humility enjoined upon

every Christian, and is more in keeping with the prideful self-exaltation which Jesus squarely condemns: "For whosoever exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted" (Luke 14:11).

Amazing as it may seem, even believers who profess a non-resistant stance in keeping with our Lord's teaching in Matt. 5:38-42, and who would studiously avoid all participation in the military, are sometimes fond of sports that are motivated by a brutal aggression that resembles war on a small scale. One of the popular cheers this author remembers in his former experience with sport as a youth was no less than a chant of sadistic aggression: "Give them a lick... give them a lick...harder...harder"—hardly the sentiment of the gentle and non-resistant Jesus. One writer notes the aggression so characteristic of competitive sports:

The so-called killer instinct is widely believed to be indispensable for athletic success. In an analysis of winning and losing attitudes among athletes, sports psychologist Bruce Ogilvie reports: "Almost every truly great athlete we have interviewed during the last four years...has consistently emphasized that in order to be a winner you must retain the killer instinct."³

Our Lord Jesus Christ said, "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth" (Matt. 5:5), but Robert M. Davis, former head basketball coach at Auburn University, had this to say:

Unparalleled coaching success has always necessitated aggression. The meek shall not inherit the championship trophies of the basketball world.... I have taken some "lambs" and turned them into "tigers"....

The aggressive coach is a stern disciplinarian...does not like weakness...must despise losers and losing.... Make a boy bold, forceful, domineering to the point of hostility; accomplish this by persistently injecting this spirit of aggressiveness into the teaching of the most minute details. Little things are important—mean, tough little things. They develop big, hard men who win.... Never let up when a competitor shows a weakness. Hit them where they are hurting and pour on the steam.... Don't show mercy on the basketball court. If you have an urge to be kind to your fellowman, join the Peace Corps.⁴

What could be clearer? Mr. Davis adds clarity to our proposition that the ethic of competition is in heated conflict with Christianity, by his oblique, disdainful, and, might we add, irreverent, references to Biblical concepts such as meekness, mercy, and kindness.

A Concise History

For bodily exercise profiteth little: but godliness is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come—I Tim. 4:8.

It is an established and well-known fact that the Jewish people, as a society, were not given to athletics. Fondness for athletic competition originated with the Greeks, who held their Olympic games in honor of their false gods, with the participants performing in a state of nakedness. When some of the Jewish priests left the altar service to attend the Grecian games in the newly constructed gymnasium in Jerusalem, the pious were horrified (I Maccabees 1:14; II Maccabees 4:12-14) and associated such activity with apostasy from the faith. Eventually the Romans adopted the Greek love of playful diversion and became fascinated with the gladiatorial spectacles, which were suited to their martial spirit. The early Christian writers, such as Tertullian (*On Spectacles*, AD 200), with practically one voice condemned this form of worldly diversion.

The Puritans of England, and later in the American Colonies, raised a powerful protest against the idleness and worldly nature of sports. Philip Stubbes, who wrote *The Anatomy of Abuses* in 1581, stated, "Any exercise that withdraws us from godliness, either upon the Sabbath day or any other day, is wicked and to be forbidden."⁵ John Bunyan, the author of *Pilgrim's Progress* and a former sports lover, received the Divine ultimatum while engaged in a game of cat (an early form of baseball). He writes that when about to strike the ball "a voice did suddenly dart from heaven into

my soul, which said, ‘Wilt thou leave thy sins and go to heaven or have thy sins and go to hell?’”⁶ Today most have become so hardened through the deceitfulness of Bunyan’s former sin, as to be incapable of hearing the voice he heard. Would to God that we might *hear it again* (Heb. 3:7,8) and likewise judge this matter to be a question of heaven or hell!

It might astonish those who today defend sports while professing Christ that the Puritan mind, realistically informed by the Biblical teaching on human depravity, saw in these vigorous bodily exercises avenues to idleness, frivolity, and stimulants awakening pleasurable sensations that give rise to immorality.

Wesley seemed to lend support to the reproof of several popular sports of his day, by subjoining in his journal an excerpt from a letter he received, “I am persuaded you are not insensible of the pain given to every Christian, every humane heart, by those savage diversions, bull baiting, cock fighting, horse racing, and hunting. Can any of these irrational and unnatural sports appear otherwise than cruel, unless through early prejudice, or entire want of consideration and reflection? And if man is void of these, does he deserve the name of man? Or is he fit for society? And, besides, how dreadful are the concomitant and the consequent vices of these savage routs! Yet such cowards are we grown, that scarce any man has courage to draw his pen against them!”⁷

Later, the October 19th, 1875 edition of *American Christian Review*, expressed this telling opinion:

Croquet is to most persons a most fascinating game, and the desire to engage in it increases rapidly. When young Christians should be reading the Bible, meditating, conversing about religious matters, praying, or attending to some important religious duty, they are often found playing croquet.⁸

But sadly, after the Civil War, voices like these began to form the minority, and with the rising popularity of the prewar organization

YMCA (Young Men’s Christian Association), which encouraged and endorsed a “muscular Christianity” of sports participation, the era of wholesale Christian rejection of the sports ethic began to come to a close. 1870-1890 witnessed a phenomenal expansion of professional baseball and by the twentieth century, as one writer observes, most denominations were now capitulating to the surrounding sports-dominated culture:

In the Puritan tradition, the early American churches vigorously opposed sports...Blue laws were passed forbidding sports participation at times when men were expected to be at worship. Today, the Sunday double-header, or the televised professional football “Game of the Week” has all but replaced the Sunday sermon. Churches now have gymnasiums and sponsor their own teams.⁹

Conclusion

When the enemy shall come in like a flood, the Spirit of the LORD shall lift up a standard against him—Isaiah 59:19b.

In view of the modern acceptance of Christian participation in sports, what should be the response of those who are seeking to walk in the old paths (Jer. 6:16)?

On the pastoral level, there must be a willingness to recognize the modern shift in sentiment as a sinister departure from the “faith which was once delivered to the saints.” For too long the question of sports has evoked but a faint whisper, if not a deafening silence from the pulpit. This sports expression of Satan’s hiss, with its sinister vibrations, reverberates in the collective consciousness of American society and should be forever hushed among the people of God. Let courageous men of sound conviction arise to warn (Col. 1:28,29) of this worldly Delilah, which continues to sap the strength, leach the love, and drain the devotion of the should be sanctified, leaving them weak, loveless, and dry.

On the parental level, let devout fathers arise, resolved to bring up their children in the “nurture and admonition of the Lord” (Eph. 6:4) and to shun the common practice of encouraging athletic interest in their children by providing them with sports equipment and other paraphernalia. Instead, let the fathers encourage their children in the spiritual pursuits of prayer, Bible study, and witnessing to the faith, while providing wholesome alternatives to competitive contests such as walking, gardening, work projects, etc.

Finally, let every reader recognize that we can no longer engage in or endorse the competitive ethic, which, as has been shown, is so completely unChristlike, and yet claim to be seeking Christlikeness in our Christian life and spiritual walk (Luke 6:46). May Jesus help us all to take warning, and to become consistent “disciples indeed” (Jn. 8:31).

Notes

¹Quoted in *The Question of Sports* (Crockett, KY: Rod and Staff Publishers, Inc., 1997), p. 75.

²E.R. Tjepkma, “Sports-Mad Schools,” *The Gospel Witness*, September 1977, quoted in *The Question of Sports*, p. 99.

³Shirl J. Hoffman, “The Sanctification of Sport,” *Christianity Today*, 4 April, 1986, quoted in *The Question of Sports*, p. 130.

⁴Gary Warner, *Competition* (Elgin, IL: David C. Cook Publishing Co., 1979), quoted in *The Question of Sports*, pp. 131-132.

⁵Quoted in William J. Baker, *Sports in the Western World* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1982) p. 75.

⁶John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding To The Chief of Sinners* (Albany, OR USA: AGES Software, The Master Christian Library, version 1.0, 1997), pp. 13-14.

⁷Journal for July 16, 1756, *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 2 (Albany, OR USA: AGES Software, The Master Christian Library, version 1.0, 1997), pp. 425-427.

⁸Quoted in *The Question of Sports*, p. 49.

⁹Arnold R. Beisser, *The Madness of Sports* (New York: Meredith Publishing Co., 1967), quoted in *The Question of Sports*, p. 62.



The ethical question of whether Christians should participate in competitive sports is as controversial as it is crucial. Few professing Christians who argue that sports of all kinds (basketball, baseball, football, ice hockey, bowling, competitive swimming, horse racing, golf, all motorized racing, the rodeo, tennis, boxing, soccer, etc.) are harmless and wholesome pastimes seem to be aware that their view flies in the face of both Biblical principles of conduct and the early Christian attitude toward sport. It is hoped that a scriptural and historical critique of this naive and novel attitude will provoke many to reconsider the question and return to a Biblical separation from the realm of all such idle pastimes. Surely, such a return will further the practice of scriptural holiness, and may in fact spark a revival of pure devotion to Christ that turns many (Daniel 12:3) to Apostolic Christianity.

*Sandhill Bible Church-4505 Sandhill Road-Auburn, AL 36830-(334)749-1062-sandhillbchurch@bellsouth.net-
www.sandhillbiblechurch.org*