

Make Sport Your Mission Series:

Born to play!

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For Ray and Annie Petre in whose home much of this book was conceived and written.

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1. It's Saturday!

"God made me for a purpose but he also made me fast and when I run I feel his pleasure". Eric Liddell in Chariots of Fire

It's Saturday morning and you wake up and think, "Yes. It's Saturday and I've got a game this afternoon". You are committed to Christ, you love your family and you like your job but at 3 o'clock on a Saturday afternoon you come alive in a unique way. This is a highlight of your week. You were born to play. If you identify with that thought or recognize the scenario, this book is for you.

Perhaps you struggle to see where your passion for sport fits into your Christian life. You never feel as alive as you do on the netball court, in the midst of the game. The thrill of intercepting the ball and setting up a scoring pass is amazing, often greater than almost any other experience. How can that be?

Many of us feel that we live double lives. At the rugby club we are very conscious of being a Christian and being careful not to cheat, swear or drink too much. But at church people sometimes think we are more committed to rugby than to Christ! They seem like separate lives. We find it easy to be a Christian on Sunday but much harder on a Saturday afternoon. Should we stop playing? But we love playing. Sport has always been a central part of our lives.

We attend church regularly, give our money and are committed to our small group, we might even be on the flower rota – well, ok, maybe not! But we love sport and we play for the local hockey team.

Yet you sometimes feel that that people already disapprove of the amount of time you give to sport. "John really ought to get his priorities sorted out and put church ahead of his own pleasure". Unless you're a professional, when you have to miss house group for an occasional mid week game, you hardly dare say why you won't be there. You know you're no less a follower of Jesus because you play sport. But how do you deal with this tension?

First of all we need to recognize that it is essential to be part of a community of God's people. The writer of the epistle to the Hebrews reminds us of this. Some people have gotten out of the habit of meeting for worship, but we must not do that. We should keep on encouraging each other, especially since you know that the day of the Lord's coming is getting closer. Hebrews 10:25

Talk to your church leaders. Tell them that you feel that God has gifted you and called you to play sport. Show them that you see your club as the part of the world in which you are to represent Christ". Explain that you will miss some church meetings but that does not mean that you are any less committed to Christ or his church. Ask them to pray for you.

This book begins to address this tension by helping you work through questions like: Is there a Christian view of sport? Are our sporting talents from God? Does God care who wins or how we play?

We believe that it is possible to be a Christian in the world of sport without being a worse Christian or a worse sports person. This book intends simply to show that there is no reason why you cannot play sport as a Christian and in a Christian way.

Thought

Playing sport is as much part of your Christian life as going to church. As Christians we are to do everything for Christ.

Discussion question

If I really believed that playing sport was an integral part of my Christian life, how would it change my attitude to my sport?

Action point

Pray before you go to every game or training session that you will represent Jesus Christ effectively that day.

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2 Does God like Sport?

On a summer's evening in Gothenburg in 1995 Jonathan Edwards prepared to jump in the World Championship Triple Jump final. As a world-class triple-jumper, Jonathan had a decent chance of a medal. What happened was unbelievable. He won the gold medal but that was not all. He jumped 18.16 metres to set a new world record. Then with his next jump, he shattered his own world record with a jump of 18.29.

As a Christian, Jonathan gives thanks to God for the moment but how does God see it? Is God pleased with Jonathan?

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

If you want to know the biblical view of adultery, it is not difficult to find it. God has said it is wrong. In the Ten Commandments you read, '**You shall not commit adultery**' (Exodus 20:14). The same message is reiterated repeatedly throughout the Bible. In any concordance or Bible dictionary, you can find another fifty verses, which condemn adultery. It is a clear cut issue.

In order to work out God's view of sport we have to take clear Biblical principles and apply them to sport, in the same way as we would need to do with a host of human activities.

Genesis is the first book of the Bible and contains in the first two chapters the magnificent account of the creation of the world. 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.

So did God create sport? The answer is yes and no! Of course God did not create sport - people did. It wasn't God who picked up the football at Rugby School and with it invented the game of rugby. The historical evidence suggests that it wasn't William Webb Ellis either but that is another story. 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. Sport is simply organized play in which we can use these talents God has given us.

Two wrong views of sport have often surfaced in the Christian church. From the time of the Puritans onwards some Christians have strongly discouraged any involvement in sport. This has been either because the activity was felt to be of itself sinful or because of sin associated with sport. That the environment of sport was predominantly non-Christian, often associated with

drinking and gambling as well as provoking an aggressive and competitive spirit, was enough to convince many Christians to steer well clear of it.

The other inadequate view of sport is to see sport purely as a tool for evangelism. It is OK for the Christian to play sport but only in order to evangelize. The activity has no value of itself.

It is true that the world of sport can be a very godless place: but can't all aspects of life be like this? As an activity in which we can use the gifts and abilities God has give us, sport is as valuable and significant as any other human activity. Further, 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.

What then is the answer to the question with which we started: Is God pleased with Jonathan when uses his body to leap further than anyone has ever done before? Our answer is a qualified yes. God created Jonathan and gave him the ability to run and jump – not to mention hopping and stepping.

God does not love Jonathan any more on a day he wins than on a day he loses. As Jonathan has put it, “the fact that the human body can jump 18m 29 is testimony to what a great creator God we serve. But I think it is more in the way I come across as I win or as I lose, and in my attitude to my fellow competitors, that God is glorified than in the actual distances that I jump”.

If, as Jonathan uses these talents his attitude is above all to please the God who made him, then God can rejoice in this particular aspect of his creation. Let's consider this further in the next chapter.

Thought

“How you handle fame, success and failure and your perspective on life, is what glorifies God, not the trophies and prizes and acclamation”.¹

Discussion question

Why does the church see music as a gift from God but not sport?

Action point

Thank God for the sporting ability he has given you. Go out and use it for his glory.

¹ Peter Pollock, The Myth of Success, in *Today* September 1999.)

3. An Audience of One

As a teenager I remember playing in the rugby match, the biggest match of my life so far. It was an England trial. I was so nervous, desperate to play well and to be picked for the England squad. There were several hundred people watching but I only saw one person – my mum who had come to watch me for the first time. The fact that she was there affected me in two ways. I so much wanted to please her and impress her. Yet at the same time I knew that even if I had a nightmare, the worst game I ever played, that she would still put her arm around me afterwards and say, ‘Alex, you are my son and I love you’. Alex Harris, Aylesbury Rugby Club

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.

Genesis 1:26

The tension between Christian values and sports values is summed up in the cliché “You are only as good as your last game”. 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.

Of course, the Christian player is inevitably caught up in this to some extent. We care how our performance pleases others. We suffer the same highs and lows as the rest of the team. But, the Bible teaches us that there is a better approach.

To understand this we need to go back to Genesis 1:26 where we read how men and women are made to rule the creation under God’s authority.

Have you ever wondered why God in the Ten Commandments was so strict in forbidding his people from creating any images of God (Exodus 20:4)? It is simply because Genesis 1:26 has taught us that there is already an image of God in the world – you and me! 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 our 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. This means everywhere we go and covers every single second of time. This includes the training ground, changing room, playing field and the post match celebration or commiserations!

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! It is to please the God who gave us our lives, made us in his image to rule on his behalf and under his authority and who knows our motivations when we play. We are to play for an audience of one.

As we as Christian players recognize that our ability to play sport is a gift from God, we 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 so much. We will want to offer our talents and

abilities as an act of worship. That means that we will still be giving 100% to the end even if the game is already lost. We need never be ashamed of being competitive and wanting to do our best provided that our motivation is to please and honour him rather than for our own praise.

What does it look like to please God? Genesis chapter two pinpoints two very specific principles, which must be applied to our sport. The first is how we use our talents; the second is how we use our relationships.

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 'Golden Rule', where Jesus tells his followers the two great commandments. 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).

We shall consider these two principles in the following chapters.

Thought

I am made in the image of God. I am his representative in the hockey club, on the pitch, on the bench, in the mini-bus, in the bar, everywhere.

Discussion question

Is there a danger of sport becoming an idol for us? How do we keep sport in perspective?

Action point

Ask what God thinks of the way you have played today before you wonder what others think of your performance.

4. Give 110%

I think of every part of my life as being Christian. God made me with the gifts I have. I do feel his pleasure when I kick a goal. Al Kennedy, Old Colfeians and Cambridge University.

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth

Genesis 1:1

The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it

Genesis 2:15

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.

Matthew 22:37

When we think of work we may well think of the place we go for forty hours a week to earn the money to live.

The creation story shows us a much bigger and richer picture of work, by revealing a God who works and who, as the New Testament explains, sends his son into the world as a carpenter! Genesis shows God hands-on making the world we live in. God likes work!

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. 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, 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".

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.

Over the years I have heard coaches at professional football clubs worry about the fact that a particular player has become a Christian, thinking that he will have lost interest in the game and lost his competitive edge. That is completely wrong.

This is often based on a misunderstanding of Christianity. Too often Christians have communicated to the world a “gentle Jesus meek and mild”. Christians are seen as wimps, who turn the other cheek and get sand kicked in their faces. The word Christian in modern usage has come to mean good-goody, nice but dull.

The Muscular Christianity movement developed in the nineteenth century partly out of a concern that the church was becoming overly tolerant of physical weakness and effeminacy. Someone even suggested that there would not be enough men to sing bass in heaven! The Muscular Christians stressed that Jesus was a real man who called his followers to be real men too. We need to represent a manly Jesus in the world of sport.

The Christian player who 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. I will not be a quitter and will always drive to get the very best out of my performance. This is what "taking care" of the world of sport for God actually requires of us.

Thought

The Christian should be the most hardworking player in the club and the most modest.

Discussion question

If I am to be the most committed, hard-working player in the club, how to I balance the demands of my job, my family and my sport on my limited time?

Action point

Be intentional about developing your sporting talent to the best level possible.

5. TEAM (Together Everyone Achieves More)

It is the final run of the two-man bob (bobsleigh) in the 1964 Winter Olympics. It is neck and neck between, Eugenio Monte of Italy, the current world champion and the British team of Robin Dixon and Tony Nash. Then disaster. The British pair discovered that the main bolt holding their back axle in place had snapped in half. There would be no time to have a replacement brought. It was for the British team, as Tony Greig would put it, “Good Night Charlie”.

Monte on hearing of the Britons’ plight, removed the bolt from his own bob after his second run, to have it fitted in the British bob. The Britons won the gold medal. Monte commented on the incident later, ‘My action was very normal for a sportsperson. You try to help the other people to have the same conditions that you have.’

**Let us make man in our image, in our likeness
Genesis 1:26**

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

**Love your neighbour as yourself.
Matthew 22:39**

How do we love people in the tough, competitive world of sport? Is it at all possible?

What does it look like to please God as we play our sport? Genesis chapter two pinpoints two very specific principles, which we must apply. We have seen that the first is how we use our talents; the second and complementary principle is how we develop our relationships. We shall consider pleasing God in our relationships in the following four chapters.

Genesis 1:26 makes it clear that we are created by a God who is relational: “let *us* make man”. We learn from the Bible that God is Trinity: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Has it ever occurred to you that 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’s “not good” for man to be “alone”. We need to be loved and to love. 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.

Loving your neighbour as yourself and treating others as you would want them to treat you in the cauldron of competitive sport is a radical concept. In the next three chapters we will see how to apply an attitude of loving our neighbours to our team mates, our opponents and the officials.

Thought

When Jesus told his followers to love their enemies, it was a truly radical concept. Applying Jesus' command to love our neighbour to the world of sport will not be easy.

Discussion question

If Eugenio Monte had not offered his axle bolt to the British team, could anyone have blamed him? What would you have done?

Action point

Ask yourself regularly as you compete: "Am I building good relationships by the way I'm playing right now?"

6. All for one and one for all

A student at Edinburgh University had been a regular member of the rugby first team, but then was dropped. Just before the next game the referee said that the player who was to take his place had illegal studs on his boots. He asked if anyone had any spare studs. As it happened the player who had been dropped, had spare studs in his kit bag. He hesitated for a moment knowing that if he kept quiet – and no one else knew that he had the spare studs – the chances were that he would get your place back. Then he said, “I have spare studs and handed them over”.

Love your neighbour as yourself.

Matthew 22:39

Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil, cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honour one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with God’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

Romans 12:9-13

Ask a retired sportsperson what they miss most about their playing days and the answer is likely to be the banter, the camaraderie. Being part of a team over a period of years, sharing the successes and disappointments creates a bond between people like very little else. You are bound so tightly together because of the immediacy of victory and defeat. You learn very quickly to be blunt with each other because competition demands it. You learn to critique and to praise each other much more often than in everyday life.

The sense of team spirit among the players is a unique experience. For many people the closest, longest lasting friendships of their lives started on the sports field.

The other side of the coin is, however, the competition within the team. You and your best mate can be competing to be the first choice goalkeeper. Each week one of you will be disappointed.

If you are on the bench, half of you would like your team to score and win. The other half of us can’t help thinking that if the opposition score, it will increase your chance of getting on the pitch. Can you genuinely say “all the best” to the player playing in your position before she goes out to play the game? If she goes down with an injury do you feel any sense of pity or is it all about you getting your chance now?

How do you love your team mate as yourself, if she has just taken your place in the team for the cup final? Loving your team mates can be difficult. Yet as sportspeople our sports team is the natural place to model what we’ve learnt in the Christian community. Our role in the team should be to bring the qualities of Christ into the team.

When we are called to “love our team mate as ourselves” one aspect of this is serving them. We are to use our abilities to the full as an act of worship to the God who gave them to us and in the service of our “neighbours” in the squad. I should not be drawn first of all to my needs as a result of my performance in a match.

Rather, having given the best of my ability on the field for the glory of God, the consequence is that in loving my team mate as myself I will always be striving to rejoice when my team rejoices and weep when my team weeps, rather than instinctively considering the benefits of my

performance – or someone else’s failure - to my own reputation. This is often best tested in adversity!

If your team loses a big game there are several ways you can deal with this. As you go into the changing room you sense the huge disappointment that you and your team mates feel. It would be a natural reaction to pout and sulk, to go into the corner of the changing room and sit on your own.

You might even try to divert the blame “if Mary hadn’t missed that tackle then I wouldn’t have been put in that difficult position in the first place. If Sandra hadn’t missed that sitter in the last minute...” You try to slide blame on to someone else. No! At this point ask yourself two questions: have I given God my best, whatever the score; can I support my team-mates right now? Get your mind off what they think of you and start thinking of how you can support them!

That is loving your team mate as yourself. It may boil down to asking at any one time on the field, “Am I more concerned with my welfare at the moment than that of my colleagues?” When that arises, to focus on the needs of the team first is to action God’s way in sport.

Loving your team mates involves meeting your responsibilities to them. Brian Irvine would have loved to have finished his career in professional football without receiving a red card. A situation in a Ross County game put him in a difficult position and involved sacrificing his own reputation for the sake of the team.

I was making a tackle in a situation, which is now deemed a last-man tackle where if I had made the tackle correctly I’d have made a goal-saving challenge to keep the team level as it was at the time.

In the event I just missed the ball and caught the man. Not only did I concede a penalty, which then resulted in the other team scoring and in fact winning the game 1-0. But I was also the last man so it was a straight red card.

I then felt I’d let the team down by being sent off and conceding the penalty which lost us a goal and lost us a game. So that’s partly the frustrations and difficult positions you find yourself in on the football pitch where you’ve to make a split second decision. You have to hold your hand up and hold your head up although you accept the disappointment and frustration of letting your team-mates down.

I knew I had made the tackle with the right intent. What is more, I had to make the tackle, because not to make it would have been letting my team-mates down if I thought I could genuinely have got the ball.

By the way, this must have wider consequences than what happens during the game. Romans 12:10-13 is an explanation of how becoming a Christian will affect your love for others who belong to Christ. In learning this in the heart of the Christian community, the next step is to take care of the world of sport by modeling this pattern of love in the sports community.

If there was ever a place to invest time it would be here in your sports club, where community can easily be nurtured and a Christian player’s faith as she plays can be translated into everyday relationships because she has begun to earn the right by the way she plays. But there is a cost. It has to be intentional. You have to structure your life around representing Him here and in this way.

It means giving my sport a high priority in my life in terms of time commitment, energy commitment, money. It does not just involve turning up to play but putting time in, deliberately building friendships, making phone calls, going to social functions, doing the extra to take it seriously.

It may mean being the last to leave the bar after the game. That is being in the bar having a beer, an orange juice or a coffee, just being there to talk, to get to know people. Be part of the banter but care for people. Notice when someone looks down and ask them what's wrong. Take an interest.

Don't feel guilty about putting time into sport. You might think sport is OK but not important. That means that I can play as long as I get away quickly and get to another meeting. That won't do. Make sport your mission! Represent God by building relationships amongst those who you invest so much of your life with, many of whom don't know a thing about what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. Knowing you may help them find out!

Thought

How brilliant is it to have a team member who is fully committed to her team mates!

Discussion question

When it is hardest to love your team mate?

Action point

Be the unsung hero in your team, the person who, unnoticed, does all the vital but trivial jobs.

7 Kill him!

I remember when I first came to England to play for Wigan, I used to get beaten up. My wife will testify to this that I used to come home every week with a black eye, cuts to the face and bruises to the body, done deliberately.

I cried to the Lord, "what do I do, do I retaliate?" But he said, "No, No, No", Just stay focussed and I'll handle everything. And the guys who were beating me up when I first came, they are the same guys who are able to come up and shake my hands. They now thank me for the game and say, "Well played". Va'aiga Tuigamala

Love your neighbour as yourself.

Matthew 22:39

Bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "it is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord.

On the contrary:

**"If your enemy is hungry, feed him;
if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.**

**In doing this, you will heap
Burning coals on his head"**

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Romans 12:14-21

Two things confuse us when we consider Jesus' summary of godly behaviour on the sports field when it comes 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.

But wait! We need an *opponent*. If you have got yourself 'up' for a game, only for the opposition not to be able to raise a team or not able to get there because of traffic problems, it is such a let down. Quite simply – no opposition, no game! To take it a stage further we need an opponent of pretty much equal quality, really to enjoy our own performance. Winning a hockey match 10-0 is fun the first time. Winning 10-0 every week will soon become boring. We need an opponent of an appropriate standard.

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?

Sport lives by comparison. We define our own level of performance by testing it against the clock or our opponent. We need that competition to develop our God given talents.

If you were 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. Moreover, for the best competition we need an opponent who can play at the same standard as ourselves.

If we see our opponent, not as our enemy but as our neighbour, and moreover a neighbour whom Jesus tells us to love as ourselves, it certainly affects our attitude to the opponent. We treat our opponent in the way we want to be treated: with respect. We want a fair game. We want a good contest. We want our 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 is to be competitive!

With that understanding perhaps the way I love my neighbour is to give him the hardest tackle my body can produce – fairly and within the rules. By doing that I force him to be the best player he can be.

Similarly I need the opponent to nail me when I get the ball and to play the most brilliant tactical game she can so that I have to take my gifts and use them to the best of my ability against her. 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 myself. It is playing hard but not seeking an unfair advantage.

That's why I can love my neighbour as myself in sport, since I understand God's desire that we please Him with our abilities and that we help each other to do so.

Of course it is hard to make an impact in one game. But if you play in a league, over a few seasons you will get to know opponents. They will respect you as a tough but fair opponent, who does not try to take unfair advantage on the blind side of the ref. Over the seasons, as you make time to socialise with them after the game, they may discover that it is your faith in Christ that motivates you to be the quality opponent you are, both in the use of your talents and the way you play the game.

Thought

If I cannot love my opponent as myself, I cannot play sport for God's glory.

Discussion question

Do you want your opposite number to play well or badly?

Action point

Have a drink with and get to know your opposite number after the game.

8. Loving the umpire – you can not be serious!

Love your neighbour as yourself.

Matthew 22:39

**Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.
Romans 13:1**

What is the Christian's attitude to the officials? It has been said that the only biblical reference to the referee or umpire is 'the man born blind'! As the Bible doesn't offer any direct application to referees, we need to look for relevant Biblical principles. Romans 13 refers primarily to political rulers but can reasonably have application to match officials, since they have been put in a place of authority over us for that game and if we are to love our neighbour as we love ourselves then it is hard to see how that can exclude the match officials.

Romans 13 is about submission to the authorities. Does this mean that Christians be players who never question the referee?

As we noted earlier, it is important to understand what love is. Loving the umpire doesn't mean saying, "Great game umpire", when she has had a poor game. Our aim is to help them be as good as they possibly can. Perhaps you would say something like, "Thanks umpire. I thought you controlled the game pretty well but could you just explain how you came to award that penalty".

Greg Linville comments 'Living at peace with officials may very well include confrontation, however. It is necessary at times to motivate officials... there are times in which an athlete and/or coach may need to lovingly motivate an official to do a better job ... The aim is to love the official, love the opponent and get a fairly officiated contest.'²

Gavin Peacock played professional football as a Christian for nearly fifteen years. He has encountered a few referees in his time. He is clear about where the line has to be drawn: 'I think it is OK to protest to the referee but only to the point of not disrespecting him. Football is partly a mental contest and trying to make sure that the referee is alert to anything the opposition are trying to get away with is part of that contest.'

If you feel that the officials are being intimidated (and influenced in their decisions) by the opposition players or coach, then to say so respectfully is acceptable. To try to counter-balance the intimidation is not. As team captain at the beginning of a game which you fear could develop into an aggressive physical battle, it may be helpful to encourage the referee not to be afraid to take the tough decision when it is needed.

When a decision goes against you when you feel you haven't done anything, how do you react? Obviously your judgment will be a bit biased and you have to bear that in mind at the time and afterwards when you are reflecting on it. If you show no reaction it might seem to the referee that you are accepting that you have committed a foul, deserving a penalty when really you feel you didn't. To argue about it is equally pointless for the referee will never change his mind. A respectful protest is perhaps the best response.

² Greg Linville, Contemporary Christian Ethic of Competition

Dissent is a big problem in modern sport. When an incident occurs in a game there is a modern when an appeal can be made to the official. “Our ball”, “She was holding my shirt”. This opportunity lasts for a second or two.

Dissent takes place after the official has made the decision. It is a negative response to the decision – “are you blind ref”, “you can not be serious”. This is different from asking for a reason for the decision or even accepting the decision but pointing out to the official in a respectful and calm tone that something has been missed.

I would suggest that for the Christian player, an appeal is perfectly acceptable but that dissent has "crossed the line". Society now accepts dissent as part and parcel of life and the game but this really is an area in which the Christian sportsperson can be different.

Remember that the officials are only human. They have good games and bad games, just like you!

Thought

My attitude to the match officials should be: how can I help the officials to produce a fair contest rather than how much can I get away with in today’s game?

Discussion question

What do you say to a referee, at the end of the game, if he has had a terrible game?

Action point

Take time to thank the officials.

9. Professional foul

The final of the 2002 Heineken Cup had reached a dramatic climax. Leicester hold a 15-9 lead in the dying minutes but Munster have a 5 yard scrum in front of the posts. A converted try will win the game for Munster. As Munster scrum half, Peter Stringer, is about to put the ball into the scrum, Leicester Flanker Neil Back illegally knocks the ball out of his hand and back on the Leicester side of the scrum. The referee is unsighted. The ball is cleared and Leicester have won the Heineken Cup. After the game, Neil Back says, "I did what I had to do".

To the woman he said,

"I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing;

with pain you will give birth to children.

Your desire will be for your husband,

And he will rule over you."

To Adam he said, "Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, 'you must not eat of it',

"Cursed is the ground because of you;

through painful toil you will eat of it

all the days of your life.

It will produce thorns and thistles for you,

And you will eat the plants of the field.

By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food

Until you return to the ground,

Since from it you were taken'

For dust you are

And to dust you will return"

Genesis 3:16-19

In Genesis 3 we see sin for the first time. Sin entered into the equation when Adam and Eve chose to rebel against God's authority, often referred to as "The Fall" Not satisfied with being made in the image of God, they wanted more. They wanted to equal authority with God; they wanted to be in charge.

Ironically one Greek word for sin is a sporting metaphor. It means to shoot and miss the mark, to fall short of the target. Just as we as sportspeople understand the concept of shooting wide, so as Christians we understand the concept of falling short of God's standards.

The consequence of the fall is judgment. In Genesis 3:14 God says, 'Because you have done this...' and continues to outline for the serpent and for Adam and Eve, the consequences of their actions. The consequence for our relationships is described in Genesis 3:16. "I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you." All our relationships are now broken because our relationship to God is broken by our rebellion. At the same time Genesis 3:17 tells us that "by thorns and thistles you will take forth from the ground". Our work, our use of our talents, gets broken too.

The Bible tells us that Adam and Eve's sin affects us all - we are all sinners because of them. Yet at the same time, by personal choice we perpetuate sin and become responsible for our own actions. The whole of creation is tarnished. What God created for mankind to enjoy in work and relationships is now ruined by our selfish and sinful attitude to them.

Sin breaks everything, everything is now flawed. Sin spoils the way we say our prayers, it spoils the way we read our Bibles. It spoils the way we use our sexuality, our money, our authority in society. It spoils our playing sport. So we should not be surprised to find sin rampant in the world of sport as everywhere else.

Within the context of modern professional sport, perhaps Neil Back is right that he did what he had to do and what many other players would have done³. Discussing the incident on BBC Radio two days later, former England hooker Brian Moore, defended Back's actions, saying that New Zealand, Australia and South Africa play like that and that if England wished to be competitive internationally, then they must play to the same rules and practices.

The Christian player must respectfully reject this view. Winning is important. It is the purpose of the contest. There is no shame in being competitive. However, the Christian plays for an audience of one, who is more concerned about the player's attitude and motivation than the outcome. Winning is not enough.

The evidence of human sin is all around us, in the world of sport as much as, but no less than, anywhere else. There is the cheating, the win at all costs attitude, attempts to con the officials, players pretending they have been fouled when they have not. The world of sport needs to be brought back to God's way, and so we can either turn our backs on it or find out how it can be corrected.

Thought

Sport has been polluted by human sinfulness as much as any other human activity and needs to be redeemed and restored.

Discussion question

Should a Christian ever deliberately commit a foul?

Action point

Be a voice for fair play, honesty and integrity in the club.

³ We are using the rugby story because it illustrates the issue well. We are trying to look at the principle and do not mean to criticize Neil Back personally.

10. Restarting the Game

For Christ died for sin once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.
1 Peter 3:18

Nduka Odizor, a quarter-finalist at Wimbledon in the early 1980s was about to play a match in a grass-court tournament in Holland when he noticed that his opponent was upset about something. "I overheard him say that he had been unable to get a pair of grass court shoes and as a result he was slipping all over the place. I offered to lend him a pair of mine. My opponent's face dropped in astonishment. He was probably thinking, 'How could anyone be so stupid?' It was written all over his face. 'Here's my hotel key,' I said, 'if you want to go and get them or send someone for them.'

When our match was called there he was, wearing my shoes!"

Therefore, I urge you brothers, in view of God's mercy, offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God, this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is - his good, pleasing and perfect will.

Romans 12:1-2

When sin entered the world and even more so when we welcome it into our lives, it spoiled everything – including sport and how we play it. The good news is that through the death of Jesus Christ, sin is defeated. God sent his son into the world and he was the only one who never sinned. When he died he took our punishment for sin from God, in order to save us from that punishment on the day when God judges the world. If we accept what Christ has done, we can be sure of eternal life in heaven with Him and meanwhile our lives will, by the presence of the Holy Spirit, gradually, but never perfectly, be restored to what God intended

When we allow God to take control of our lives, all the flawed things – including playing sport – start to get mended. God starts to address them and work inside us. He starts to deal with things and the Holy Spirit speaks to us as through the Bible, he challenges us about things in our life, which are not right. This applies to everything in our lives, including how we play against the right winger.

Look at Romans Chapter 12. The first eleven chapters of Romans explain the wonder of what God has done for us in Christ. In 12:1-2 Paul exhorts the Romans to live in the light of God's mercy "Therefore, in view of God's mercy" implies that Christian ethics are the Christian's grateful obedience in response to what God has done for him in Christ.

Paul is saying that God in Christ has saved us and restored His image within us. We now have the power of God to begin to restore the use of our sporting talents for his pleasure alone and our relationships for the sake of our sporting neighbours.

What does this process look like? Paul, the writer of the letter to the Romans says: I urge you to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God - this is your spiritual act of worship".

A living sacrifice! When Paul writes about a living sacrifice, that's an oxymoron. Sacrifices are not alive. You chop their heads off, or stick a stake in them. Paul on purpose uses a seemingly ridiculous phrase.

Now if you are a sportsperson the idea of offering your body as a living sacrifice, has extra meaning. Having a body is essential if you are going to play. But we are asked to offer that body as a living sacrifice, a sacrifice that wriggles on the altar! This doesn't mean that we are not to play but rather that we must play as people who have given our bodies to Jesus Christ.

It's going to be hard. You've got to be really battling at this all the time. Sin will never give up on us. We think we nailed it! We think "Oh good, I haven't given in to that temptation for a month - class!" And before you know it you've done it again. Where did that come from?

When you're playing really well and you know everyone will say how great you are, how hard is it not to get arrogant and just take your foot off the peddle for the last five minutes because no one will notice? God will, and he wants you to give all to him all the time, including the last five minutes.

When somebody is trying to put you off and psych you out, actually breaking the rules, going beyond what is acceptable in the confines of the sport, how are you going to react? How are you going to deal with it? How sanctified are you going to be? How are you going to love them? How are you going to pray with all your heart and keep it together and represent Jesus and show them respect when they're not respecting you?

That is why it is a living sacrifice. Anybody who has an easy time applying their spiritual growth in their sports career and doesn't find it is a struggle is doing something wrong. If you are not in a battle in the Christian life there is something the matter. It probably means that you are not active for Jesus Christ.

The moment you step out on the front line for Christ there is conflict. And so Paul says if you are going to belong to Jesus, if your identity is restored, go on - offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, because this is holy and pleasing to God.

Paul calls it your spiritual act of worship. Now let us clear from our minds any idea that worship is restricted to singing songs or that worship is an hour every Sunday. We have seen in this book that we are called to give our bodies to God to please him, as an act of worship, a 24/7 lifestyle activity!

To offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, this is your spiritual act of worship. That's when you worship God - when you give every piece of your mind, body, time, everything to God, that's worship.

Paul also says "be transformed". This transformation is not the Christian's own doing, but the work of the Holy Spirit. However, we have a responsibility to let ourselves be transformed, to respond to the leading of God's Spirit. We are to be transformed by God, not conforming to the world.

Now that means representing Christ on the pitch. You play to God's standards, not the etiquette of the game around you. You cannot pull someone's shirt because everyone does it. That attitude is conforming to the world, not being transformed by God.

This is a lifetime's work. But "do not conform" is something we need to hear again and again. It must ever be a great part of the content of Christian exhortation. As Christians we have always to confess that to a painfully large extent our life is conformed to this age. This means standing out for Jesus in the club because you live by God's standards and do not conform to the world.

Paul Cox was playing for West Side Church in the Kingston and District League. It was a tough game against a very physical opposition, who were putting the ref under pressure. West Side conceded a corner. Cox was on post. From the corner a forward turned the ball into the goal, the ball going between Paul and the post.

The ball went into the net and straight out again through a hole in the side of the net. The ref gave a goal kick. Paul was one of the few who knew exactly what had happened. He had a moment to think about it and decided to tell the ref that the ball had gone in. The opposition were amazed. Paul takes up the story:

“After a few moments, the ref came out of his daze and gave the goal. The whole opposition team came and thanked me. As I went back to the centre circle, the guy I had been marking said sorry for all his earlier abuse. All the questioning of every decision stopped. After the game, they all came and thanked me again. And then back in the changing rooms a few of them thanked me again”. Transformed, not conformed.

Now that you are restored, go and love people, even your enemies, even the right-back who kicks you. If we have been given the talents to play, what better option is there before us? If we have been filled with the Holy Spirit, we will grow in the situation.

It isn't going to be easy. You will be stretched, physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually when you play sport? Will you lose your temper? Will you swear or hit back at someone?

The way you behave on the pitch will make an impact. As people look at the Christian player, they will be thinking, “She loses with dignity. She gives everything she has. When we lose she is gutted but she always has a sense of what is fair” Or when you break up a fight or refuse to hit back, your team-mates will notice.

Perhaps in a one-off game, people might say, “She does not care. She was straight to the opposition when we lost”. But over a year or two years, people will notice. They will know that you want to win. You want to maximize your talent. You want to be as good as you can. But if it does not go well on that particular day, you lose properly.

What would a Christian player start to look like if they had the mental toughness to keep going to the best of their mental strength, whatever someone does to them? If something goes wrong, you say, ‘I made a mistake, but I am going to keep going’. If someone hits you, you say, ‘No I am not going to let it rile me. I am not going to lose my temper. I am not going to cheat. I am going to overcome it, by being even stronger’ Physically, mentally and spiritually we are going to play and compete and give it all we have got.

Our first reaction, may be to say, it's not possible. There are issues about the subtleties of the etiquette of particular sports. You have to work it out in your own sport. What does a Christian player look like? They always give it all they've got, and they respect their opponent. At best, they win with tremendous humility. And lose with great dignity.

Thought

If I play sport for his glory, it's worship. If I don't, it's idolatry

Discussion question

What are the situations in your sport where it is hardest not to conform to the standards of the world?

Action

Recognize that you are in a battle and get people to pray for you as you play.

11. Talk to the coach

The reason, according to George Burder in the nineteenth century, why no Christian could possibly go to the theatre was that the idea of prayer about the theatre was quite ludicrous. How could you possibly pray, he asked, “Lord! Go with me to Covent Garden. Bless the actors, strengthen the dancers, assist the musicians, let us have a merry evening, and render the whole performance useful to my religious interest”.⁴

Pray continually

1 Thessalonians 5:17

As Christian sportspeople we believe that we not only can but must pray for the world of sport. But how do we pray for the world of sport.

First of all let us clarify what we should not pray for. We should not pray selfishly, “Lord, make my team win” or “Lord, may I score the winning goal”.

- Our first prayer should be one of thanks. As people who love sport we can thank God for our bodies, which enable us to compete. We can thank God for the gifts to play sport
- Pray for your own involvement in the club, that you would be able to play well and to use your skill fully and fairly to the glory of God. Pray that your attitude would be above reproach. While recognizing that the coach is important and your team mates are important, that ultimately you are playing with an audience of one in mind
- Pray for the game for your team captain and the club officials. Pray for the match officials – that the Lord would open their eyes! Pray for a good and fair contest.
- Pray that you would handle success and failure equally well – no pouting if you lose, play badly or are dropped; not proud if you do have a good game but to have the guts to say something like: Thanks but you know as a Christian, I believe that God gave me the gifts I have got and made me able to play like that so I don’t deserve the accolades.
- Pray that team mates and opponents would see from the way you play that you serve God and live your life by his standards.
- Pray for your team mates – generally or for particular ones whom God has placed on your heart with whom you have been able to share your faith.

Thought

Some sociologists describe the sports stadium as the modern man’s cathedral. In the truest sense of the word our sports club can be our cathedral, a place we go to worship God.

Discussion question

Why would people think that you could not pray about sport?

⁴ G Burder, *Lawful Amusements*, 1805, P29.

Action point

Pray before every visit to your club that God would help you to represent Christ effectively.
Pray that God would enable you to show love for everyone you come in contact with at a game or training session.

12. Make Sport Your Mission!

If you love sport and are a follower of Jesus, get out there and play! Represent him in the team. Be Christ's person in the club. See it as part of your Christian life, as your worship to God.

Try not to do it alone. If there is another Christian in the club, work together. If not find one or two other players and support each other. Pray together about your involvement in your clubs.

If you blow it and lose your temper on the field one week, share it with the group and let them pray for you. It is easier when you have a little group to support you, who commit themselves to pray for you and for the one or two that you are witnessing to. A group like this can encourage you but it will also challenge you because the rubber hits the road when you know you have to report back on how your witness has been in the last week.

Ask the Holy Spirit to make you a brilliant team mate, a brilliant coach, a brilliant club secretary or whatever and get out and play!