Ladd and Mathisen trace the interaction between sport and Christianity from 1850 to the present day, from a North American perspective. The book is of immense value as the first systematic attempt to document the developing relationship between sport and Christianity and to understand how Christian sports ministry evolved. A weakness of the book - for the international reader - is that it is written from a totally American perspective.

Their basic thesis is that there was an initial engagement of religion and sport in the mid to late nineteenth century, inspired in part by visits to the USA by representatives of the British Muscular Christianity movement, notably the Studds. ["Perhaps no single family affected the muscular Christian movement among evangelicals in America more than the Studds of Great Britain" Page 44]. Then in the early twentieth century evangelical Christians disengaged from sport. In the post Second World War period, a re-engagement of sport and Christianity took place, which led to the development of sports ministry as we know it today. Not everyone finds the evidence for a “disengagement” between sport and Christianity as clear-cut as Ladd and Mathisen do.

The book is extremely useful in documenting the role of some of the key Christian figures in American sport. The contrast between Amos Alonzo Stagg who believed that "coaching football at Chicago was a call to Christian service in which he could best be used "for my Master's service"" [Page 65] and Billy Sunday who gave up playing professional baseball when he converted to Christianity, because he found the two incompatible, is stark.

As the “disengagement” developed, Billy Sunday became an early role-model in sports evangelism as he "used his fame as an athlete only to attract and entertain an audience. He did nothing to engage religion and sport in a meaningful way". [Page 82].

Ladd and Mathisen see Billy Graham’s invitation in 1947 to Gill Dodds – America’s leading middle-distance runner – to run around the track and then share his faith at a stadium event where Graham was preaching as the launch-pad of re-engagement. The reasons for the re-engagement were pragmatic: "Uppermost in their minds, however, were revival and the need to attract youthful listeners. Sport provided exactly the attraction they needed". [Page 232]

Another significant step was Youth For Christ taking a basketball tour to Taiwan in 1952. The formation of Athletes in Action which sought to introduce athletes to Christ and then to use the platform they have for evangelism, followed soon afterwards. The appointment of chaplains to pro clubs and the development of sport within churches was a further step.

Ladd and Mathisen’s analysis of American evangelical attitudes to sport in the last 50 years is thought-provoking. Even if we do not agree with all their conclusions, they will challenge our thinking. They argue that modern Christians see sport as a tool for evangelism rather than as something which is of value in its own right. 
"In marked contrast to a core element of the Tom Brown myth of muscular Christianity that 'sport builds character' or 'sport builds manliness', the essential core of the modern myth must be something like 'sport enhances the gospel' or 'sport helps save souls'. [Page 215]

There have been all too few serious analyses of sport and Christianity. For that reason alone Ladd and Mathisen’s book should be welcomed. Of course they have not got everything right but the questions they ask will surely help us to look at our own ministry in a new light and come up with better answers.