

## SPORT

---

*England may have had a late surge in the latest Ashes series, but, asks **John King**, should any competing team claim that God is on their side?*

# Does God really care who wins the Ashes?

MYSELF, I don't think the Lord God is much bothered about who wins the Ashes or the World Cup. After all, a sporting contest is designedly set up to eliminate interference from non-players; it is deliberately isolated from the changes and chances of life in general. It is a little world of its own with no more relationship to everyday affairs than a game of chess or ludo.

Not everybody sees it this way. Those who think football transcends the issues of life and death and those competitors who solicit outside help by prayer, obeisance, religious gesture or the fingering of a religious trinket are looking to God to be on their side in an enterprise they believe to be supremely important.

It is no more and no less than the erstwhile habit of generals — eg Hindenburg or Haig — to claim that God was on their side. History demonstrates, of course, that God is not on anybody's side.

To set up an artificial struggle and then proclaim that God will back one contestant rather than another is, if anything, more stupid than going to war and asking God to help the guns do their work.

This is not to say the range of contests from the sport of kings to Formula One racing via football, cricket, squash and synchronised swimming is pointless.

To delight in the cunning of a cricket captain and the courage of a National Hunt jockey is to take pleasure in gifts, aptitudes and dedication which are powerfully human qualities.

We do well to develop such capabilities just as we do well to shine if we can in an examination room or in building up a business. It is fitting to seek God's grace in fulfilling every responsibility in life — and the supreme responsibility is, of course, the upbringing of children, for which no awards or recognition are forthcoming.

We need reminding that we err if we make too much of trinkets and fame. The rich fool discovered this. (He might equally well have been a retired Test cricketer or an almost forgotten tennis champion). There are more important things in life.

There are certainly more important things in life than committing the gross error of regarding God in instrumental terms — ie assuming that he can be coaxed into helping us gain our pre-determined ends.

That is why the sub-heading of a fascinating new paperback\* by Stuart Weir — 'Sportstars' secrets of success' is slightly tainted. Success, as Kipling held, is an impostor. We need to keep a weather eye on those who exalt success over diligence.

The content of the book is, however, better than its sub-title; it is full of good sound common sense.

Top sportsmen entertain us for money. They play to win — partly because winning pays better than losing. Inevitably, sport fosters showmanship and self-seeking. Things be-

along lines of class. Today the sporting scene is corrupted by, amongst other things, the big money that has moved in.

The brand name flashes on team outfits are the tip of the iceberg, a mere pointer to the price that is paid for sponsorship and other deals.

We should be foolish to expect it to be otherwise. Any institution is flawed; its affairs are in the hands of fallen human beings. This is no reason for repudiating those who kick, bat, run, ride or jump their way to fame; it is merely an indication that one has to

keep one's eyes open and not expect angelic standards from sportsmen any more than we expect them from actors.

Nor can we expect elderly organisers of a national game to bring grounds up to acceptable standards when there are strong incentives to carry on in the same old way.

Stuart Weir has done us a service. He eschews 'yelping about God'; he recognises that sports champions are human like the rest of us; he identifies the triviality and misguided enthusiasm that bring sport and religion into disrepute.

He is not quite so clear about the institutional and management flaws that put pressure on individual performers.

Chestnuts like 'Should a batsman walk?' put in an ap-

pearance. So does Sunday observance. Urgent concerns like the influence of sponsors and advertisers are given a fair inspection.

The ground covered ranges from technical, internal matters such as the balance of the letter of the law and the spirit of it in any particular contest, and the place of sport in the wider scheme of things.

Whether this paperback will ease the troubles of Graham Taylor or Graham Gooch may be doubtful. Whether it will be read by youngsters who idolise their heroes and imitate them in every way may again be doubtful. But this book deserves to be read.

It will help us couch-potatoes to see sportsmen and sportswomen — not least the (single-sex, regrettably) Church of England cricketers and footballers about whom we read in the church press in a clear light that is sometimes missing.

\**More Than Champions*, by Stuart Weir (Marshall Pickering 236pp £4.99)



Graham Gooch in a prayerful mood

ing what they are, there has been a tendency for ghetto Christian believers to lavish adulation on sports and showbiz personalities where restraint might have been more appropriate.

When they express their views, sports people, like showbiz people, are no more and no less informed than their contemporaries who have less exciting roles in life.

And when Ted Dexter, for example, is described in *The Times* as a born-again Christian, it does not guarantee that he will have anything worthwhile to say on theological issues any more than his faith guarantees that he will field a winning side at Trent Bridge or wherever.

This paperback recognises that sport, because it is a big industry, is subject to corruption. Venal football managers, 'amateur' players, professional foulers, race-horse nobblers, avaricious equipment manufacturers present a less than pretty picture. But the institutional shortcomings are equally apparent.

A generation or two ago the sporting scene was corrupt because it was flawed