Introduction

A Grandstand View at the Cotswold Olimpicks

On an unusually warm Friday evening in early June, my wife and I took our places on a grassy bank in the Gloucestershire countryside. Before us was a wonderful panorama of the Vale of Evesham and in the foreground a fenced-off area surrounded by half a dozen security guards. Seated in this natural amphitheater we were among several thousand spectators gathered for sporting entertainment. Behind us on the plateau of Dover's Hill we had just bought our supper from one of the food stalls, and there were to be displays of performing pipers, dancers, martial artists, dogs with their handlers, and single-stick fighters (not all at the same time, you understand).

To the casual onlooker what we were about to witness—including team obstacle races, a five-mile run, hammer-throwing and shot-putting, and, most remarkably of all, shin-kicking—seemed part village fair, part school sports, and part It's a Knock Out.[1] But Robert Dover's games have a fine pedigree, going back four hundred years to 1612. Dover, a local Catholic gentleman, appears to have had some kind of royal blessing on his attempt to preserve and foster the traditional English games which were under threat from Puritan sensibilities in many areas of England. James I sent Dover a suit of clothes as a mark of this blessing, and Dover wore this suit (or so we believe) complete with feathered cap to open the

1. Those too young to recall the whacky BBC TV game show which ran from the mid-1960s could consult the website dedicated to it: http://www.its-a-knockout.TV/.

games year by year—for they were an annual event. In the 1630s many of the great poets of the day celebrated his munificence by contributing to a volume of poetry in which these Cotswold Games were associated with the ancient Olympiad, and they became known as the "Cotswold Olimpicks."

The annual celebrations came to end when James I's successor Charles I was deposed and the Commonwealth established. The Puritan parliament suppressed the games, but Charles II then reinstituted them in or shortly after 1660 following the Restoration. In the 2010 games which we witnessed the local Catholic priest played the part of Robert Dover in the opening ceremony—though, somewhat ironically, a team from the local Baptist church won the team competition of the evening. What would their Puritan forbears have made of that?

Dover's games continued until the nineteenth century when they became more chaotic and finally fell victim to opposition from landowners wanting to enclose Dover's Hill as pasture, and from clergy who became censorious about what they saw as rowdy behavior. In the twentieth century the games were revived once more and are now an annual event again. The British bid to host the Olympic Games in 2012 included a reference to Dover's Games. The London Olympic Committee wrote that "An Olympic Games held in London in 2012 will mark a unique anniversary—it will be exactly 400 years from the moment that the first stirrings of Britain's Olympic beginnings can be identified."[2]

Why might any of this be interesting to those not within easy reach of Chipping Campden, or to those without curiosity concerning Olympic trivia? This book will seek to explore the relationship between Christianity and the all-pervasive cultural phenomenon of modern sport. In so doing we will be examining theories which suggest, among other things, that sport has become a kind of surrogate religion in the twenty-first century. We will also be attempting to outline a theology of sport—that is, suggesting how sport might fit into our understanding of God's way with the world and our attempt to live godly lives in the world.

The Cotswold Olimpicks clearly have interest to sports historians (and there are many of them). But they seem also to have particular significance for those concerned with theology, religion, and sport. The games began as a theological and political gesture; James I supported them because he believed they presented opportunities for conversion

2. *Robert Dover's Cotswold Olimpicks*, "About the Games."

(of Catholics!); they were suppressed on ostensibly theological grounds by Puritans, showing attitudes which have proved pervasively influential down to the present day; in the nineteenth-century, crowd trouble was one of the factors in their discontinuance. Robert Dover's Games, we shall see, present many of the issues about theology, religion, and sport in a kind of microcosm.

The first three chapters in this book are each relatively self-contained, though the total argument requires readers to work through the whole. The history of sport, in particular in relation to Christianity, is traced in the first chapter—noting the major changes of mood and policy as the phenomenon which we know as modern sport develops over many centuries. The second chapter considers sport as a feature of contemporary society by exploring it in relation to a number of themes: business, the media, consumerism, gender, race, and politics. In chapter 3 the focus switches to a discussion of both contemporary religious belief and practice, and sporting experience, and examines the interrelation between these phenomena.

The chapters in the second half of the book, chapters 4 through 6, belong together and build in various ways on the discussions of the earlier chapters. In them we attempt to outline a theology of sport. In chapter 4 the main focus is on a biblical theology of play; in chapter 5 we consider what motivates us to be involved with sports and why winning might matter to us; we also ponder the distortions of sport which sometimes arise from a disordered desire to win. In chapter 6 the concept of transcendence is given a key role in this developing theology of sport, and questions of sin and salvation are considered. A conclusion answers one or two remaining questions while leaving others for another time. Throughout the whole we make use of the responses received in empirical research among sports players and supporters which ground the reflections in particular ways.

I owe thanks to many people for their help with this project. At Wipf & Stock, Robin Parry has been encouraging from the moment (to use an appropriate sporting metaphor) the idea was first pitched to him, and Christian Amondson and Matt Wimer have been patient supporters through the writing and editing phase. My copy-editor Trisha Dale has attempted to tame my text for publishing.

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Readers will soon recognize the immense debt I owe to academic colleagues and others who have explored aspects of sport, or religion, or both, before me. Stuart Weir, of Verité Sport, has given particularly valuable assistance in initial orientation to the literature and in discussing various ideas and lines of argument. In the wider academic sphere I have been helped by countless colleagues, most of whom I do not know, and some of whose work I have drawn on significantly in my writing. Naming them all at this point would be lengthy and risk omissions, but my gratitude is real.

For the research I undertook with sports fans and players I would like to give special thanks to all those who responded, but perhaps also give a special word of thanks to the generous supporters of the following clubs who responded to my surveys en masse: London Irish, Cardiff Blues, and Bristol rugby union; St Helen's rugby league; Cardiff City, Reading, and Everton football. Also thanks to the players of: Gosford All Blacks Rugby Football Club, Kidlington Cricket Club, Ranelagh Harriers athletics club, and footballers from the Berks, Bucks & Oxon League. Finally, my thanks also go to all my American respondents who returned the American versions of the surveys, especially staff and students at Georgetown College, Kentucky. If only all our teams could prosper!