

Three Views of Sport Adopted by the Church

A Critical Assessment

Introduction

IN THE PREVIOUS CHAPTER it was established that value systems must necessarily include a subjective viewpoint. We are now ready to explore the value placed on sport from within a particular tradition. Not surprisingly, the Christian tradition itself has seen a variety of positions and continues to develop its views on sport. In exploring some of these traditional views we will be in a position to see that the common attitudes toward sport adopted by Christians throughout history have not typically corresponded to the account of social practices defended in the previous chapter. In fact, I will argue that the Church has, perhaps unknowingly, more frequently viewed sport from a Rortian view than from that of MacIntyre.

There is no doubt that a large percentage of Christians feel perfectly at home in the sports world. Over the last century the church has focused much of its energy and resources in the realm of sport. Several Christian ministries have risen up in the last half century, including one of the largest Christian ministries in any context, the Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA), which has seen significant growth since its beginning in 1954. Today, the sports-oriented ministry can be found on more college campuses in the United States than the next three campus ministries combined.¹

1. Fellowship of Christian Athletes, "Beginner's Guide to FCA."

Local churches are rapidly building sports complexes for their congregations. Several Christian universities in the United States and elsewhere carry undergraduate degrees and some even offer graduate degrees in sports ministry.² It is not uncommon to hear sermons from pastors that are full of sports analogies or to see worship services cancelled or rescheduled on account of a major sporting event such as the Super Bowl. There is even a sports devotional Bible filled with daily messages “designed to drive home the lessons of Scripture with inspiring stories from all corners of the world of sports.”³

Yet only in the last couple of hundred years have Christians become so openly fixated on sport. Historically the church has had a slightly negligent attitude toward them. The sparse references to sport in historical Christian literature are often found in the more general topic of leisure or games. While lacking systematic qualities and theological clarity these references provide enough details to trace the progression of ideas in relation to sport and leisure. As we will see, different historical periods and theological influences have offered diverse opinions on the role of sport. Many doctrines of the Christian faith have been interpreted differently throughout history. Still, one observation that makes sport unique is that for a topic with notably insufficient theological reflection it has been approached with such opposing viewpoints. In other words, for an issue apparently unworthy of the church’s intellectual attention it has produced some very strong and polarizing views.

This sundry history includes the view that sport is sinful on one extreme and the view that sport is the purpose of life on the other extreme.⁴ The objective here is to show that these assorted views offer an interesting and informative starting point for how Christians might inform their present assumptions about sport, its significance for the Christian life, and what values should govern our participation in it.

While a chronological progression of these views may be discernible, I am going to propose my own categorical account that offers a more synthetic way to see how Christians have historically understood sport and leisure. There are three prominent views I wish to address. They are what I will call the insignificant view, the idleness view, and the instrumental view. All three

2. Malone University in Canton, Ohio, currently offers a Master’s degree in Christian Leadership in Sports Ministry.

3. Branon, *Sports Devotional Bible*.

4. A detailed historical account of the relationship between sport and religion is beyond the scope of this work. See Hoffman, *Good Game*; and Baker, *Playing with God*. Higgs presents a thorough history that is distinctly American in his book, *God in the Stadium*.

are apparent in different periods of church history and an outline of the major tenets of these views will serve us well in identifying a contextual basis for a theology of sport that is closely aligned with the concept of play developed in a later chapter. In developing these historical elements in this manner I hope to avoid the criticism of Christian sports fans offered by Robert Johnston that “rather than ground their discussion in biblical reflection and careful observation of play itself, Christians have most often been content to allow Western culture to shape their understanding of the human at play.”⁵

Sporting Imagery in the Writings of Paul

Any Christian who is a sport enthusiast will be able to quickly point to a handful of verses in the Bible that make references to sport. The most common of these is penned by the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 9:24–27.

Do you not know that in a race all the runners compete, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.⁶

The parallels between sport and the Christian life are evident in this passage and it is at once clear why he chose athletics as his metaphor. The ideas of training practices, discipline, and goal-oriented attitudes used by athletes are easily applied to Christian devotion. It also was a metaphor that his audience certainly would be familiar with since Corinth had been the host city of the Isthmian Games for more than five hundred years by the time Paul wrote these words.

Yet it was not only the Corinthians to whom Paul would use athletic metaphors. A number of other New Testament passages exist that refer to athletics in some fashion, most of which come from Paul. This has caused some speculation about Paul’s experience with the Greek games, as Stuart Weir points out. “Because of Paul’s insights into sporting matters and his use of sporting jargon, some writers have speculated as to whether he might have received some sport coaching, participated in the games or at least been a spectator at them.”⁷

5. Johnston, *The Christian at Play*, 83.

6. 1 Cor 9:24–27.

7. Weir, *What the Book Says about Sport*, 17.

One such suggestion comes from historian Harold Harris. He puts forward the possibility that Paul was “a devotee” of the games and therefore they “escaped condemnation by the Church.”⁸ He points out that many early Christian leaders followed Paul’s lead and took advantage of the sporting language as illustrations for the Christian life. However, such speculation is unlikely when one more closely inspects Paul’s language and the historical context in which he was writing. The games were such an integral part of ancient Greek society that sporting language would have been common coinage. Victor Pfitzner, in his important work on the ancient Greek *agôn* tradition, says,

The Pauline metaphors from the sphere of the games are so general in their lack of concrete details that it is not hard to imagine that any Hellenistic Jew could have either written or understood them without himself having gained a first hand knowledge of the games from a bench in the stadium.⁹

This idea becomes more plausible when one thinks about the sporting language used today in non-athletic contexts. One can understand the phrase “par for the course” to mean “average” without having a working knowledge of the way in which golf is scored. Being “in a pickle” or a “sticky wicket” are phrases from baseball and cricket, respectively, commonly understood to mean someone is in a rather difficult situation. A great many other sporting phrases have been adapted to common language thus taking them away from their original sporting context. In fact, more than two thousand sports metaphors have been documented.¹⁰

Pfitzner suggests that Paul may have been in a similar situation. “We may accept this verdict if it is limited to the adoption of an image and terminology that had become popularized in Paul’s day, but not if it also extends to the adoption of its content and application as well.”¹¹

The appearance of athletic imagery in Paul’s writings is not enough evidence to imply Paul’s participation in or even approval of the Greek games. In fact, Paul certainly would have opposed many of the practices associated with athletic contests. Shirl Hoffman concurs: “the pagan religious ceremonies that were an integral part of the contests, and the sharp contrasts between the ethos of the competitions and Paul’s exhortation to

8. Harris, *Sport in Greece and Rome*, 227.

9. Pfitzner, *Paul and the Agon Motif*, 187.

10. Palmatier and Ray, *Dictionary of Sports Idioms*.

11. *Ibid.*, 188.

the spiritual life, make it quite likely that he shared the largely negative views of influential church leaders who followed in his wake.”¹²

Indeed, the church leaders over the next several centuries were adamantly opposed to athletic contests. One reason may be traced to the point at which Paul terminates the sporting metaphor. He separates athletes from Christians by using a “they/we” contrast. The athletes (they) compete for a perishable crown. The Christians (we) “compete” for an imperishable. This led to an apathetic attitude towards sport that turned critical under monastic influence.

Sport as Insignificant

The passion many present-day Christians share for sports is profound. However, Christianity has had relatively little to say about sport throughout history. This may come as a surprise to us in twenty-first century Western society. Sport and leisure have become staples of both modern society and the church. It is reasonable then to assume that such an important activity in the lives of millions of people would also be an important issue in Christian thought. Yet, sport has not always held the overwhelming status it now enjoys and perhaps as a result has not always been an obvious target for significant theological reflection.

Two points are worth noting about this view. First, the idea that sport is theologically insignificant seems to be an underlying attitude expressed in the other two views. Therefore the ideas typically overlap and to state them here as well would be redundant. Secondly, I mention the attitude of sport’s insignificance if for nothing else than to point out an area where the church can concentrate more serious theological thought. It is unfortunate that the church has neglected an issue so important in society.

Augustine is one of the earliest to adopt an apathetic stance. He lists his brief complaint against sport in *the Confessions* when he says,

I no longer go to the Games to see a dog coursing a hare; but if I happen to be going through the country and see this sport going on, it may attract my attention away from some serious meditation—not so much as to make me turn my horse’s body out of the way, but enough to alter the inclination of my mind. And unless you showed me my infirmity and quickly admonished me either by some thought connected with the sight itself to rise

12. Hoffman, *Good Game*, 44.

up toward you, or else to pay no attention to the thing at all and to pass by, I should stand there empty-headed like a stock.¹³

For Augustine, the problem with sport lies in the distraction it creates from the more important work to be done by the Christian, namely “serious meditation.” He stopped attending the games in order to focus on obtaining what Paul described as an “imperishable wreath.” His view suggests that sport lacks any soteriological or sanctifying qualities and is therefore not significant enough to merit even the briefest of thoughts. It is a distraction from the loftier demands of the Christian faith.

It is reasonable to assume that if the early church thought sport had any theological significance they would have written about it. Instead, the overwhelming themes of pagan worship and immoral behavior preoccupied any discussion of games. In the minds of the early church leaders these prevailing themes were so entrenched in public sports that they could not separate the idolatry from the games. As a result, they threw out the baby with the bath water, denying any attention to the intrinsic value of sport.

The consensus in this view is that sport lacks any sort of eternal value and therefore is not worth Christians paying it any attention. There is an implicit denial that sport has a fundamental purpose, or essence, given by God. It is simply a humanly constructed activity that will ultimately distract the Christian from attaining his or her higher calling. In this respect Christians are more closely aligned to the Rortian view of sport that sees no inherent value in sporting activity.

As we will see in a moment other periods in the history of the church have adopted similar stances where they are unable to view sport separated from either the questionable practices surrounding the activity or the external benefits gained. This has left a vast opening in theological discourse over a topic whose importance continues to grow in society. For that matter, sport’s importance continues to grow within the church and there still is relatively little thought devoted to Christian theological reflection on sport.

The absence of Christian voices in the world of sport is astounding. Shirl Hoffman poignantly addresses the “deafening silence” of the evangelical community by stating that it has been “eager to lead the charge in the culture wars but has remained largely uncurious about sports.”¹⁴ He continues, “Christians frequently voice criticism about the violence in video games, but the violence of sports such as football and hockey, which involves their children more intimately and dangerously, rarely is questioned.”¹⁵

13. Augustine, *Confessions of Saint Augustine*, X. 35, 241–42.

14. Hoffman, *Good Game*, 11.

15. *Ibid.*, 11.

Surely Hoffman is correct to point out the blind eye of the contemporary Christian community. Christians are quick to condemn the violence produced in Hollywood then unquestioningly cheer for their favorite Mixed Martial Arts fighter as he bloodies the face of whoever will challenge him.¹⁶ But Christians have not always been so swift to accept sports. In addition to seeing it as insignificant the church has traditionally taken the negative attitude that sports are immoral or the neutral attitude that says sports are instrumental and best used to serve some other purpose.

Sport as Immoral

Idolatry and Immoral Behavior

Condemning all forms of games as gruesome, immoral, and idolatrous, Christians were among the most outspoken critics of Roman and Greek games. As a means of strengthening their case writers offered specific details of the grotesque events to demonstrate how bad they were. In writing about the textual evidence of Roman spectacles sport historian Donald Kyle notes that “ironically, some of the most valuable evidence comes from Christian authors, who wrote highly charged polemics, apologies, and martyrologies in which they, as outsiders, condemned Rome’s games as idolatrous rites they could not enjoy or abide.”¹⁷

The foremost of these Christian texts is undoubtedly Tertullian’s treatise *De Spectaculis*.¹⁸ This short work is the harshest assessment of sport in early Christendom, though he does not restrict his criticism to athletic contests. He condemns all forms of theatre, games, and spectacles (hereafter summarized by “games”). Tertullian was initially concerned with the games’ pagan origins. Of athletic competition he asserts that the “whole equipment of these contests is stained with idolatry” and that all behavior associated with the games is “incompatible with moral discipline.”¹⁹

For Tertullian, the games were thoroughly anti-Christian though it was not only the pagan rituals that drew his criticism. In fact, roughly half

16. I am aware that sports like boxing and MMA are not the same in all respects as violent video games and movies but they do promote images of violence that are powerful enough to influence others toward violence especially when the athletes are cheered and adored for their violent behavior. Furthermore, I will argue in chapter five that Christians should be concerned about the injury risks of these sports.

17. Kyle, *Sport and Spectacle in the Ancient World*, 14.

18. For more cultural and historical insights on the whole of Tertullian’s *De Spectaculis*, see Sider, *Christian and Pagan in the Roman Empire*, 80–106.

19. Tertullian, *De Spectaculis*, 263, 271.

of his treatise focuses on the immoral behavior surrounding the games. He begins by condemning games because of their pagan ritual origins and having found sufficient reason to reject them on these grounds alone he spends the second half offering a more impassioned moral criticism. Little more is said about the idolatry of the games, possibly because he felt he had exhausted the argument.²⁰

A more likely explanation is that he was eager to begin addressing the more immediate problems with games. Even though they had pagan origins both Roman and Greek athletic contests had become largely secularized. Allen Guttman suggests “whatever religious significance remained was apparently overshadowed in the eyes of the mob accustomed to bread and circuses and blood.”²¹

Tertullian did not believe the pagan origins would be enough to convince his Christian audience to avoid the games. Now he sets about the task of showing why the behavior of the games is inappropriate for followers of Christ. Even if the idolatry is no longer present (an idea Tertullian clearly did not accept) there are still many reasons for Christians to abstain from the games.

It is commonly assumed that Roman games consisted of gladiatorial contests where participants fiercely battled to the death while the Greek games were civilized, highly competitive contests that honored physical abilities. Kyle points out the stereotype that “Greek sport elevated but Roman spectacles debased human nature” held some truth but it would be more accurate to allow for each to have a significant amount of influence on the other.²² Regardless of their distinctive natures, both Greek and Roman games were extremely popular in Tertullian’s time.

Apparently they were popular among Christians as well thus explaining why Tertullian needed to write this treatise in the first place. He did not single out specific games or themes but considered all of them anathema and attempted to show why Christians should share his view. “You can never be pleased with injurious or useless displays of strength, nor with the care that develops an unnatural frame (outdoing God’s handiwork). You will hate the type of man bred to amuse the idleness of Greece.”²³

20. Tertullian outlines five specific areas in which the games involve idolatry. Having dealt with the origins, names, equipment, places, and arts he states in chapter XIII that “enough has been said” to prove their relationship with idolatry. From here he begins his attack on the immorality of the games.

21. Guttman, *From Ritual to Record*, 24.

22. Kyle, *Sport and Spectacle*, 19.

23. Tertullian, *De Spectaculis*, 277.

Still, even after the heavy criticism of athletic contests by early church leaders like Augustine and Tertullian one might ask why, if the games are to be wholly rejected by Christians, would Paul use athletic imagery in the sacred scriptures? Stuart Weir's response is to suggest that, "if indeed sport is evil, it is surprising that the Holy Spirit, who inspired the scriptures, did not lead the writers to omit the sporting metaphors or indeed to warn their readers of the dangers of having anything to do with the games."²⁴ Weir makes an interesting point though it is imprudent to make an argument from omission. Holy Scripture can surely speak to the people in their social setting utilizing metaphors they would understand without necessarily condoning or condemning the actions found in the literary device. It is pure speculation to suggest reasons why the Holy Spirit would exclude further articulation of a point, aside from the questions it begs about the nature of the divine inspiration of Scripture.

Pfitzner is more helpful in pointing once again to the distinction between *image* and *content*. He answers,

The image suggested itself not only as an illustration already popularized, but also as the most suitable since the conditions under which the athlete contested also applied, in a transferred sense, to the athlete of the Gospel. In no other image, not even in that of the soldier, was there such a wealth of parallels.²⁵

This seems to conflict with the strongly anti-sport ideology of Tertullian who boldly states "it is above all things from this that they understand a man to have become a Christian, that he will have nothing more to do with games!"²⁶ To be sure, he was aware of Paul's use of athletic imagery but it does not stop him from condemning the games. "But if you urge that the stadium is mentioned in the Scriptures, so much I concede you. But the things done in the stadium—you will not deny that they are unfit for you to see."²⁷ To accept any part of the games is to accept that which comes from the devil. Tertullian further explains that the games "one and all were instituted for the devil's sake, and equipped from the devil's store (for the devil owns everything that is not God's or does not please God)."²⁸

Is this strong language justified? Certainly Christian morality would condemn the pagan rituals, sexual promiscuity, and brutal violence of the

24. Weir, *What the Book Says about Sport*, 29.

25. Pfitzner, *Paul and the Agon Motif*, 193.

26. Tertullian, *De Spectaculis*, 289.

27. *Ibid.*, 277.

28. *Ibid.*, 289.

games, but is it fair to claim that all games do not please God and therefore come from the devil? Or did Tertullian, and perhaps Augustine, go too far in their dismissive and fervently antagonistic view of games? Is there something valuable in games that they missed?

It is doubtful that either of them saw inherent value in games since neither one gives much attention to games in their own right. Based on the few excerpts pertaining to games it is likely that they did not conceive of them in this way. Augustine rather flippantly dismisses them as distractions while Tertullian focuses primarily on the pagan affiliations and immoral actions surrounding the games rather than the games themselves. This adds credibility to the idea that they had dismissive attitudes toward sport.

Yet, Tertullian does allude to the possibility of certain activities being created with a godly purpose but corrupted by games. He says, "Equestrian skill was a simple thing in the past, mere horseback riding; in any case there was no guilt in the ordinary use of the horse. But when the horse was brought into the games, it passed from being God's gift into the service of demons."²⁹

He does not elaborate as to whether he means the "ordinary use of the horse" to be for work or for leisure but given his sharp criticism of idle pleasures in the opening paragraphs, the most likely assumption is that Tertullian saw the purpose of the horse as a means for human beings to accomplish godly tasks rather than the mere enjoyment of horseback riding. Therefore, it is doubtful that he had leisurely activity in mind, further reinforcing the notion that early Christian leaders considered leisure insignificant and unworthy of theological discourse in its own right.

On the other hand, we find in Augustine a glimpse of value in leisure. He offers a brief comment on play in his short work on music. "I pray thee, spare thyself at times: for it becomes a wise man sometimes to relax the high pressure of his attention to work."³⁰

Still, there is not much sympathy for leisure in the mind of Augustine. Leisure was a necessary evil that must be fought against continually. He illustrates this in his own struggle with eating and drinking. They are required to rejuvenate the body but it becomes sinful when one finds the activity pleasurable. He considered himself "at war" with this pleasure and strove to eliminate the pleasure of food so as not to become its slave. He attempted to make eating an emotionless activity. Just as there is nothing pleasurable about taking medicine, there too should be no pleasure in eating.³¹

29. Ibid., 255.

30. Augustine, *De Musica*, ii. 15, 4.

31. Augustine, *Confessions* X 31, 232–35.

It is in this context that Augustine makes his mention of games, only a few pages later in the same chapter of the *Confessions*. It is likely then that while he did recognize the necessity of relaxing from work, such relaxation should not be pleasurable. This pleasure would then become a threat to one's more important task of meditating on God.

Moreover, Tertullian offers an argument similar to Augustine's when he asks, "Do you think that, seated where there is nothing of God, he will at that moment turn his thoughts to God?"³² The answer, for Tertullian, is clearly no. There is nothing for the Christian to gain by attending the games. Indeed, it is the mark of Christians that they no longer go to the games.

The Idleness of Mirth

Despite the best efforts of Christian leaders like Tertullian, Christianity became more and more accepting of sport, though it may be inaccurate to view the ascetic campaign as a complete failure. At the very least its proponents were successful in making it obvious to the laity that the practices surrounding the games were unfitting for the Christian. As a result, over the centuries Christians came to adopt many of the games into their own religious celebrations. While this may not have been the outcome men like Tertullian had envisioned, it is reasonable to suggest they were instrumental in bringing about the heavy involvement they sought to eliminate since the condemnation of immoral behavior served to reinforce the idea that if Christians want to play it must be on their own terms. No doubt games would have found their way into the life of the church anyway. Nor were the games adopted *in spite of* monastic opposition. Rather, since critics had little to say against sport as such, there was no substantial opposition to Christian versions of sport. As was the case in many of the pagan religions, games became foundational to a number of Christian religious festivals.³³

However, by the time of the Protestant Reformation there was renewed vigor in some Christian circles to completely eliminate games from the lives of their faith's practitioners. Though key reformers, such as Luther and Calvin, were advocates of an instrumental view of sport and offered very few writings on the value of games, they sparked the next wave of "anti-sport" Christian thought that would become a prevalent attitude for the better part of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

32. Tertullian, *De Spectaculis*, 289.

33. It is questionable whether Tertullian and Augustine would have been likely to support Christian versions, even those done as part of a Christian celebration or festival since, as we have said, they were unable to separate pagan sin from the games.

In distancing themselves from the Catholic Church, Protestants also succeeded in reviving the animosity between their religion and sport. Just as many early Christians rejected all forms of games for their pagan affiliations, many Protestants, with their anti-Catholic sentiment, cast away all games associated with the Catholic festivals. The Protestant opposition to sport began as a statement against the Catholic Church but soon came to be perceived as an individual spiritual cleansing. On the Protestant view, not only were they tainted by the Catholics but the games themselves were a sinful waste of time. Christians had far more important matters to attend to than playing games, even if those games were in celebration of God's goodness.

The Protestant movement away from frivolity to a life of work was discussed at length in Max Weber's influential work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.³⁴ Many of Weber's suggestions have been sources of intense debate but there are two key ideas relevant to our present topic.³⁵ First, the Calvinists Weber studied believed that a healthy commitment to work provided evidence of salvation. Their interest in work was not primarily for the financial gain, though they were pioneers in the idea that Christians could, in morally appropriate ways, seek the accumulation of wealth in good conscience. This was permissible so long as one's wealth came from honest labor with the motivation to glorify God. Instead, the powerful work ethic developed within their capitalist society found its inspiration in the freedom to pursue work of heavenly value.

While there has been much debate over whether or not Weber implied that Protestants are somehow the chief architects of capitalism, one thing is clear. Protestantism reasoned out a work ethic that flourished during that particular stage of modern capitalism's development. McGrath summarizes Weber's modern capitalism as, "rational, possessing a strong ethical basis."³⁶

This ethical basis, Weber says, comes from a religious motivation to do good works. In talking about the ascetic views of Calvinism he focuses on the evidences of salvation. God's elect are only known by a life spent doing works that bring glory to God. Weber identifies this as a motive from fear to work hard. Christians are to engage in hard labor not to earn salvation but to prove it. "In order to attain that self-confidence intense worldly activity is recommended as the most suitable means. It and it alone disperses religious doubts and gives the certainty of grace."³⁷ It may be argued that Weber

34. Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.

35. For theological discussions of Weber, see Ryken, *Worldly Saints*, 23–38, 57–72; McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin*, 219–46; Hudson, "The Weber Thesis Reexamined"; Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*.

36. McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin*, 223.

37. Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, 83–84.

has misunderstood Calvinism on this point or at least failed to capture an alternative motive in doing good works. Not all Calvinists would agree that good works ought to be done to prove one's salvation. Rather, because of one's salvation there exists a genuine desire to do good works. In addition to strengthening their assurance of salvation the Westminster Confession states that Christians "manifest their thankfulness" by doing good works in obedience to God's commandments.³⁸ Whatever the motivation, Weber is correct in pointing to the Protestant emphasis on being productive.

In fact, a strong work ethic was a defining characteristic of Puritans. Their Creator and Savior demanded a life of worship and service, both of which were intrinsically tied to laboring in one's vocation. Time spent relaxing when one should be working was perceived as a direct disregard for the Christian's duty. It also ran contrary to numerous passages that underline the role work has in the life of believers. Dozens of references in Proverbs to the blessings of hard work versus the destruction of the lazy were often cited as were many of the New Testament scriptures warning against idleness, such as these words from Paul:

Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with toil and labour we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you. It was not because we do not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate. For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat.³⁹

Spending time playing was something non-Christians did. Laboring night and day is the example set in both the Old and New Testament scriptures for Christians. Ignoring this example had serious consequences in the eyes of the Calvinist community. Though specific writings on sport were few, several Puritan leaders were rather outspoken against idleness more generally. One of the most articulate detractors of idleness was Richard Baxter. On several occasions in his massive volume, *A Christian Directory*, he warns against sinful indolence. Particularly in reference to sport he says, "all sports are unlawful which take up any part of the time which we should spend in

38. Center for Reformed Theology and Apologetics, "Westminster Confession, Chapter XVI 'Of Good Works.'"

39. 2 Thess 3:6-10.

greater works . . . and all those that take up more time than the end of a recreation doth necessarily require.”⁴⁰ More generally he attacks the sin of idleness when he says, “The rich he [the tempter] tempteth to an idle, time-wasting, voluptuous, fleshly, brutish life; to excess in sleep, and meat, and drink, and sport, and apparel . . . to waste their time in unprofitableness.”⁴¹

Again, something more like the Rortian view than the MacIntyrean view is evident in this approach to sport. Rather than seeing sport as a social activity with internal goods, the pursuit of which develop moral virtues, the immoral view sees it as a quest of individual desires that promote all manners of sinful behavior.

However, Baxter’s statements present an opportunity to clarify a point about the unfortunate stereotype placed upon him and other Puritan leaders. These statements are not an unqualified condemnation of these activities. In fact, they are statements that exclude the possibility of these activities being inherently sinful. While it is too presumptuous to say Baxter is implying that it is no more possible to prohibit sport than it is to prohibit sleep, it is clear from these assertions that he is allowing for the possibility of sport being a morally appropriate activity. This provides a foundation for Baxter to articulate what sports he believes to be acceptable (when they meet highly specified standards) and sports that are never acceptable for Christians to engage in.

The idea that Satan would tempt us to pursue these things in *excess* suggests Baxter saw a proper role for leisure. Otherwise, he would have condemned these activities unequivocally. Furthermore, he is not singling out any of these items specifically as the context of this section is against the wealthy wasting their time doing only these things rather than by, say, helping the poor or serving God with their talents. Baxter was indeed critical of those who took sport too seriously. “You would little think that they are speaking to the most holy God, for no less than the saving of their souls, when they are more serious in their very games and sports.”⁴² Taking such a serious attitude toward leisure is, for Baxter, nothing short of idolatry. Clearly Baxter and other like-minded Christians recognized these activities as a potential area for temptation to sin but the manner in which they criticize leisure suggests their quarrel lies in its improper use rather than in using it at all.

Using the blessings of God to serve others rather than wasting them selfishly is a constant theme in Puritan writings but has had the misfortune

40. Baxter, *The Practical Works of Richard Baxter*, 387.

41. *Ibid.*, 278.

42. *Ibid.*, 546.

of being interpreted as a prudish rejection of all things fun. This perception, says Puritan scholar Leland Ryken, is misinformed. The condemnation of leisure found in many Puritan writings when understood in context suggests their problem was not with sport and other leisurely activities, *per se*. Rather, “the statements of the Puritans occur chiefly in contexts where they are talking about the aristocratic classes who did not work for a living, monks who retired from the world, and the Catholic proliferation of religious holy days.”⁴³

True, they universally condemned some leisurely activities as unsuitable for a servant of Christ. They also prohibited participation in any sport on Sundays. One will also find a perpetual emphasis on seriousness, but to say Puritans were categorically against sport and leisure is misleading and untrue. Many found sport and other leisure events rather enjoyable and valued such activities as an important resource in the Christian life. However, this enjoyment was always to be restrained to its proper function so as not to lead to either idleness or idolatry. It is this warning that is so frequently cited in current discussions of Puritan attitudes toward leisure.

Another aspect to the Puritan stereotype that may give us more clarity on the issue is presented by historian Bruce Daniels. He poses the question of whether or not there may have been some discrepancy between what we have in the recorded writings of the Puritan leaders and the actual practice of everyday Puritans. He asks, “was there a divergence between the rhetoric expressed in literary evidence, and the reality reflected in the daily living habits of the general public?”⁴⁴ Indeed, it is my own assumption that the amount of literature and sermons by the articulate Puritan leaders suggests this discrepancy to be the case. If the Puritan community agreed wholeheartedly with these critics of mirth then it hardly seems necessary for the leaders to continually plead their case.⁴⁵ On the other hand, it may be reasonably estimated that these outspoken critics saw many leisurely activities as a constant threat to their ideal standard of Christian living and in this case were “preaching to the choir.”

43. Ryken, “The Puritan Ethic and Christian Leisure for Today,” 35.

44. Daniels, *Puritans at Play: Leisure and Recreation in Colonial New England*, 10. Moreover, there were certainly discrepancies not only between clergy and laypersons but also between geographical groups of Protestants. For example, New England puritans were notoriously more rigid than their counterparts in the southern United States.

45. Perhaps they would be persistent if their targeted audience was non-believers, but it seems that the vast majority of these treatises are aimed at the sanctification of the believer and helping them avoid sinful behavior rather than offering evangelistic messages to non-believers.

In either case, the Puritan leaders' words were widespread enough to brand the majority of sixteenth to eighteenth century British and American Protestants as having a strongly negative view of sport and leisure. But as we have already pointed out, this notion is somewhat misleading. As Ryken again points out, "although the Puritans failed to grant sufficient credence at a theoretical level to the non-utilitarian side of life, in practice they valued their non-working hours more than we (or they) might think if we listened only to their pronouncements."⁴⁶ Even the most vocal opponents of many leisurely activities accepted some sports as instrumental to the Christian life. But their ideas about the usefulness of sport did not originate within the Puritan movement. To be sure, traces of instrumentalism can be found throughout the history of the church but we need to return to Aquinas in the thirteenth century who paved the way for a more robust account of sport's usefulness.

Sport as Instrumental

The pleas by early monastics for Christians to withdraw from the games continued and a number of Roman emperors who had converted to Christianity played an important role in dismantling the games. Two of the more significant events were the banning of the gladiatorial games by Constantine in 325 and the Olympics by Theodosius in 393. Both emperors were Christian but it would be inaccurate to suggest the Christian religion was solely responsible for ending all the games. Economic and cultural factors played their respective roles as well. There is evidence to suggest that even after their prohibition the games continued in some form or fashion well into the fifth century, often times in Christian cities and with Christian participants.⁴⁷

While the Greco-Roman games came to an end sport never did. It merely took on other forms and actually gained in popularity among Christians. Theologians and clergy throughout the Middle Ages differed greatly on what role leisure should play in the Christian life. The church wanted to allow individual Christians the opportunity to be involved in games but without exposing them to the immoral behavior that seemed to follow large scale sporting events. This led to the church condemning the tournaments and hosting their own festivals. Leisure became an "integral part of medieval church life" as the church courtyards "provided some of the best places to play games."⁴⁸

46. Ryken, "The Puritan Ethic," 43.

47. See, Kyle, *Sport and Spectacle*, 346; and Harris, *Sport in Greece and Rome*, 237. See also Hoffman, *Good Game*, 60.

48. Hoffman, *Good Game*, 61.

The Utility of Play

As the church became accustomed to participating in sporting events a theological problem ensued.

One of the sticking points that prevented large-scale Christian ecclesiastical endorsement of sport was the seeming incompatibility between Christian teaching on the need for believers to be good stewards of their time (a godly gift) and carving out blocks of time to engage in what was considered largely frivolous activity.⁴⁹

Aquinas offers a solution to this problem. He sees the merits of play and says, “Just as man needs bodily rest for the body’s refreshment, because he cannot always be at work, since his power is finite and equal to a certain fixed amount of labour, so too is it with his soul, whose power is also finite and equal to a fixed amount of work.”⁵⁰

He did not share the ascetic views of Augustine and Tertullian. Leisure was, according to reason, a desirable thing. Just as the body is made for physical labor the mind is made for the labor of contemplation. In fact, since contemplation was a loftier goal than physical labor, the weariness of the mind would surpass the weariness of the body. If the body is wearied by its physical work, Aquinas reasons, how much more so will the soul be wearied when it is “intensely occupied with the works of reason?”⁵¹

For Aquinas, “the remedy for weariness of soul must needs consist in the application of some pleasure, by slackening the tension of the reason’s study.”⁵² He clarifies this pleasure he refers to as “words or deeds wherein nothing further is sought than the soul’s delight.”⁵³

Aquinas relies heavily on Aristotle in that he describes play as an autotelic activity. Aristotle says that play, or “pleasant amusements,” seem to be choice-worthy activities in their own right rather than necessary for some other end.⁵⁴ It is also true, according to Aristotle, that in order for an action to be virtuous it must be aimed at some other end beyond the action itself. Furthermore, he believed “the happy life seems to be a life in accord with virtue, which is a life involving serious actions, and not consisting in

49. Ibid., 64.

50. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, 168, 2.

51. Ibid.

52. Ibid.

53. Ibid.

54. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, X. 6, 162.

amusement.”⁵⁵ If this be the case are we to conclude that games, which have no end but themselves, cannot be virtuous?

On the contrary, since relaxation of the soul is in accordance with reason Aquinas considers play to be an acceptable activity. He does so with a couple of stipulations. The pleasure “should not be sought in indecent or injurious deeds or words” and must be done in moderation so as not to become all-consuming.⁵⁶ When these words of caution are followed, Aquinas believed there could be virtue in games and play. In fact, he goes on to explain that both excessiveness and deficiency in playful actions are sinful. This is in accord with Aristotle’s idea that the virtuous life is not spent in amusement. There is room for leisure, of course, but a life consumed by it cannot be a truly happy life. Christian thinkers like Aquinas and the Puritans would agree. A life of idleness cannot be a life pleasing to God.

This reinforced the attitude of acceptance of sport that had been building slowly within the church. It also laid the foundation for the instrumental view of sport that has dominated Christian thought since that time. Hoffman notes that the position adopted by Aquinas and other medieval theologians meant that “the pleasures of play became redeemable on the strength of their usefulness.”⁵⁷

This idea that sport could be used by Christians in service of their heavenly Father did not end with medieval theologians. Rather, it was a notion more forcefully pursued by post-Reformation Christians, particularly English Puritans such as Richard Baxter. Baxter approved of some leisure activities, giving the following definition to lawful sporting practice.

No doubt but some sport and recreation is lawful, yea needful, and therefore a duty to some men. Lawful sport or recreation is the use of some natural thing or action, not forbidden us, for the exhilarating of the natural spirits by the fantasy, and due exercise of the natural parts, thereby to fit the body and mind for ordinary duty to God. It is some delightful exercise.⁵⁸

Given the stereotype of Puritan attitudes toward sport it is surprising to read that one of the most prominent Puritans says sport is needful and in some cases a duty. But to label Baxter a sport enthusiast would be going too far. Upon closer inspection we find that he gives eighteen specific qualifications that must be met before a sport is acceptable to Christians. In addition

55. *Ibid.*, X. 6., 163.

56. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, 168, 2.

57. Hoffman, *Good Game*, 67.

58. Baxter, *Practical Works*, 386.

to obvious restrictions, such as the prohibition of any sport that tends to promote sinful behavior, (i.e., violence, lust, etc.), sport is only acceptable when no better use of time can be found. The first and foremost qualification is that “the end which you really intend in using [sport], must be to fit you for your service to God; that is, either your callings, or for his worship, or some work of obedience in which you may please and glorify him.”⁵⁹

Three things merit our attention to Baxter’s proposal for suitable play. First, his discussion of sport is in the context of his framework for appropriate Christian moral behavior. As such, he is outlining when it is morally acceptable for Christians to engage in sport. However, he takes it a step further when he says,

the person that useth it, must be one that is heartily devoted to God, and his service, and really liveth to do his work, and please and glorify him in the world: which none but the godly truly do! And therefore no carnal, ungodly person, that hath no such holy end, can use any recreation lawfully; because he useth it not to a due end.⁶⁰

This line of thought about whether or not Christians should view sport differently than non-Christians is an idea worth pursuing further but is perhaps best left for the following chapter. Presently, it should be noted that Baxter was insistent that only Christians, when properly following his other restrictions, could participate in sport lawfully. All leisure, by anyone else, for any other ends, was immoral and unacceptable in God’s eyes.

Second, even Christians, for whom sport was in some cases permissible, were subjected to a very detailed list of when and how it was appropriate. Such strict regulations lead one to ask whether or not there is anything left to enjoy about sport. His pious checklist makes it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to participate in lawful sport. The Christian will be so busy making sure not to violate a single letter of the law that it will be less like recreation and more like another form of labor. In other words, Baxter’s requirements for lawful sport make leisure too much work. By his own definition leisure should be some “delightful exercise” but the structure in which he allows sport presents such a small window of enjoyment one may question how far he has moved from the ascetic view already discussed.

Finally, even if we allow that Baxter does not advocate a complex form of asceticism and that it is possible to truly enjoy lawful sport, he still presents an inadequate theological account of sport. The first qualification reveals an instrumentalist framework that finds no value in leisure as such. Instead, play

59. *Ibid.*, 387.

60. *Ibid.*

is only valuable as a means to some other end, namely labor. Baxter does allow for different types of leisurely activity although he provides strict guidelines that emphasize the development of physical strength. People of different vocations have need of different types of leisure. Some need to recreate the body while others, the mind. While giving the appearance of acceptance to a number of sports he again eliminates most sports by default.

For Baxter, it is unlawful to engage in a sport when a more appropriate form of leisure is available. Since one's physical condition is of primary concern for being productive he structures his case in such a way as to make physical labor categorically more appropriate than many sports. This narrows the list of lawful sport even further. For instance, someone in a physically demanding job does not need the physical exercise of many sports so reading may be a more appropriate activity, whereas someone whose work does not require a great deal of physical labor needs to develop physical strength through more strenuous activity. Such sedentary persons (Baxter lists students and scribes as examples) have the greatest "need of exercise and recreation, and labour is fitter for you than sport; or at least a stirring, labouring sport."⁶¹ So while some "labouring sport" is permissible, the spirit and context in which he writes this suggests that, for someone whose work does not include physical labor, the most appropriate form of leisure is physical labor.

Baxter describes sport in purely utilitarian terms. That is, sport is only good in so far as it brings about another good. For Baxter, the chief utility of sport is preparation for service to God. Many Christians have pointed to several ways sport functions in service to Christian values. In the final section of this chapter we will look at those most commonly promoted by sport enthusiasts.

The Positive Benefits of Sport

There are surely numerous benefits to participating in sport but each of them will likely fall under one of three major headings. First, sport provides a means to mental and physical health. Secondly, it promotes social benefits, including community identity and the development of friendships. A third common support given to sport is that it serves as a moral resource by teaching desirable character traits and provides alternatives to mischievous behavior by young people. We will look at each of these three benefits and assess their instrumental value as characterized by the majority of Protestant Christian thought. This chapter will conclude by suggesting that this

61. *Ibid.*, 388.

common understanding of sport reduces the importance sport plays in the life of the believer.

First, sport is commonly used as a vehicle to a healthy body. Millions of people around the world engage in sporting activity on a regular basis as a means to get or stay in shape. From the Christian perspective this is beneficial because it enables the servant of God to be better fit for heavenly service. To quote Baxter again on the subject, "If it have no aptitude to fit us for God's service in our ordinary callings and duty, it can be to us no lawful recreation."⁶² He does not intend this to be a universal condemnation of certain activities. He goes on to say that the same leisurely activity may be beneficial to those who have a different calling than ourselves. If it benefits others in the pursuit of their calling it may be acceptable for them but in so far as it provides no means of fitting oneself for service it is unacceptable.

Any activities that have "no higher end, than to please the sickly mind that loveth them" are unlawful.⁶³ Therefore, on Baxter's view, sport is to be done for the sake of physical health. This idea carried over to the late nineteenth-century Protestants as well, particularly those influenced by the Social Gospel, which emphasized glorifying the human body. Historian Clifford Putney writes that those in this tradition "considered upkeep of the body a virtue and its neglect a sin" and, as a result, "came perilously close to calling musclemen saints and the sick sinners. Exacerbating this tendency was the Social Gospel idea of salvation in this world, which seemed to require more doers than thinkers."⁶⁴

Putney may be right that the movement intensified the Protestant emphasis on the value of the body but Social Gospel Christians were no more emphatic about the need for physical health than their seventeenth-century counterparts. Though the theological scene differed greatly between these two Protestant movements it seems there is relatively little by way of conflicting views on the functional nature of leisure and sport. One believed the body was inherently good and required physical activity to build up that goodness while the other favored a much more restricted view where the body was merely a vessel to be used in God's service. Both the Social Gospel and Puritanism found mutual ground in the idea that sport was an activity of instrumental value. The former saw it as a means to work out one's salvation through righting social injustice in the world while the latter sought to use sport as preparation for one's calling.

62. *Ibid.*, 387.

63. *Ibid.*

64. Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, 57.

Current attitudes toward sport seem to have less of a theological basis for determining sport's value. Some Christians suggest little other reason beside the health benefits is needed to justify participating in sport. In her practical guide to involving young girls in sport Holly Page, a coach and physical education instructor, says that "the physical benefits alone of participating in athletics are so significant and compelling that all young students should be involved in athletics at least throughout their junior high years."⁶⁵ Page is reiterating the notion of universally mandating young people's involvement in sport that is currently enforced around the world. Nearly every state in the USA has legislation requiring varying levels of physical education courses in order to graduate with many in the medical field calling for an increase in such requirements.⁶⁶

As a form of exercise sport holds value in the obvious way of physical health but it also contributes to the athlete's mental and emotional health. Learning to play the game requires, among other qualities, determination and commitment. Sport equips us with the means of developing these virtues. An individual's mental focus necessary for competitive athletics may "help the student-athlete perform better in academics and can carry over to other areas of adult life." Page goes on to say that sports can help its young participants "learn to deal with complex and sometimes confusing emotions brought on by success and by failure. Young athletes can also become more aware of their individual likes and dislikes, educating themselves on the subject of . . . themselves."⁶⁷

Secondly, sport is frequently supported by the notion that it fosters positive social influences. The benefits to society provided through sport come chiefly in one of two ways, either as a form of cultural identity and community pride or in developing friendship. Virtually every level of sport is comprised of a geographical or ideological heritage that represents the members of that community. A football (soccer) team like Glasgow's Rangers not only competes for the sake its players but in many respects represents certain religious factions in Scotland, (i.e., Protestant vs. Catholic). In baseball, the Chicago Cubs are comprised of more than the nine players on the field. They are part of a cultural tradition, a practice, which extends from and contributes to a narrative that is distinct to that sports team.

Perhaps the grandest sporting venue of them all is also one that highlights the different cultural representations more than any other. The

65. Page, *God's Girls*, 28.

66. Cawley et al, "The Impact of State Physical Education Requirements on Youth Physical Activity and Overweight."

67. Page, *God's Girls*, 29.

Olympics brilliantly contrast the diversity of cultures with the unifying spirit of sport. Sport is valued, in part, because it is able to transcend all cultural, political and religious boundaries. There is a uniqueness to sport that draws upon some of our most fundamental connections as human beings.

In his comments during the opening ceremonies John Furlong, CEO of the Vancouver Organizing Committee for the 2010 Winter Olympics had these poetic words to say about the unifying capabilities of sport.

The Olympic flame has touched many millions and prompted spontaneous, peaceful celebration. Reminding us all that those values that unite and inspire the best in us, we must never abandon. As the Olympic Cauldron is lit—the unique magic of the Olympic Games will be released upon us. Magic so rare that it cannot be controlled by borders. The kind of magic that invades the human heart touching people of all cultures and beliefs. Magic that calls for the best that human beings have to offer. Magic that causes the athletes of the world to soar, and the rest of us to dream. Tonight, here in the glow and wonder of the Flame, we can all aspire to be an Olympian. From whatever continent you have come we welcome you to Canada, a country with a Generous Heart. We love that you are here. You are among good friends.⁶⁸

In addition to geographical borders many Christians see opportunity to reach across religious borders. Some view the unique dynamic sport presents as an opportunity for evangelism. Stuart Weir comments, “sportspeople have the opportunity to demonstrate the image of God in an environment which is often lacking in sacrificial and unconditional love.” He goes on to add, “Christians have found opportunities to share the gospel in gyms, golf courses, tennis courts and sports fields the world over. The lost may not come to church but, by seeing the sports club as your mission-field, you can take Christ to them.”⁶⁹

This was part of the motivation in the nineteenth-century movement known as “muscular Christianity.” In response to what was perceived as the feminization of the church this movement sought to recast the image of a Christian as someone who was very physically fit, athletic and masculine. It was active in sport-related activity in an attempt to draw men and young boys inside the church walls. It was also used as a tool for recruiting masculine missionaries. By the end of the nineteenth century more than half of American Christian missionaries were women. Using sport to build up the image of

68. Mahlmann, “Welcome to Vancouver: Stirring Speech from John Furlong.”

69. Weir, *What the Book Says about Sport*, 36–37.

the church as something muscular and work-oriented was a central strategy for increasing male participation in global and domestic missions.

Today, a number of sports mission organizations exist throughout the world including ones like the International Sports Federation. ISF has partnered with more than seven hundred missionaries and sent over eight thousand volunteers to more than one hundred and twenty countries. They state their instrumental view of sport very clearly when they say,

We believe that sports is merely a tool that we can use for a specific purpose. It is not our goal to leave behind better, stronger or faster athletes resulting from participate with our volunteer teams. Our goal is to use the tool of sports to build a relationship that can hopefully lead to an open sharing of the Gospel of Jesus Christ with those who will listen and want to hear.⁷⁰

Another social benefit of sport often tied to the first is the unique atmosphere in which friendships can flourish. Page again applauds sport for, “being a great place to start building healthy, long-lasting friendships that will assist a young person in making a smooth transition through all the developmental stages of the teenage years.”⁷¹

However, it does not hold true that sport always results in such healthy relationships. Often time the competitive nature of sport fosters animosity and even hatred toward other players. In spite of this, it does appear to be the case that sport is more conducive to developing friendships and strengthening the sense of community than it is to corrupting it. As Michael Novak notes, there is a unique bond between players on the same team (and to a lesser extent the fans of that team). “For those who have participated on a team that has known the click of communality, the experience is unforgettable, like that of having attained, for a while at least, a higher level of existence: existence as it ought to be.”⁷²

Such a close-knit bond results from teams functioning in the proper manner. To achieve this level of functionality individuals must learn certain key elements of good social behavior. A mutual relying on each other, a commitment to do one’s best for the sake of the other team members, and developing a group personality idiosyncratic to that particular team are all socially good benefits present in sport. “The point of team sports,” Novak says, “is to afford access to a level of being not available to the solitary individual, a form of life ablaze with communal possibility.”⁷³ The sense of

70. International Sports Federation, “Why Sports Missions?”

71. Page, *God’s Girls*, 30.

72. Novak, *The Joy of Sports*, 144.

73. *Ibid.*, 149.

possibility here is inspiring and perhaps signifies more than an instrumental value. Unfortunately, it is often seen as just that, a tool in service of good social etiquette.

A third area of benefit sport is purported to supply comes from the contributions to the individual participant's moral development. The moral pedagogy of sport is developed in both active and passive forms. It actively promotes virtues such as teamwork, commitment, fairness, and hard work. Passively, sport serves as a deterrent, especially for young people. Involving children in sports is a way to occupy their time, leaving less opportunity for mischief.

The idea that sport provides a double-edged sword in the attack against improper and immoral use of one's time was, not surprisingly, championed by the Puritans but the notion of sport as a tool for moral character was not. A primary reason for this is because Puritans believed divine revelation alone was the source of morality. Sport offered nothing of ethical value that could not be attained through Scripture and other Christian sources. In fact, as we have seen, it was most often the case that sport destroyed moral behavior rather than encourage it. Despite this, the Puritan misgivings about the moral elements of sport have given way to a Christian account that praises the moral characteristics believed to be essential to most sports.

Growing these virtues often goes hand in hand with the passive use of keeping trouble at bay. Page claims, "sport can and should be used like a pressure-release valve to positively discharge and direct youthful energy that might otherwise be misguided or misused for destructive purposes."⁷⁴

On the other hand, countless examples can be readily found that suggest sport also cultivates less favorable moral traits. Aggression, violence, and selfishness are just a few of the behaviors typified by many athletes. In the next chapter we will look more closely at the serious challenge these attitudes present to the Christian athlete. Presently, we simply need to recognize that moral transference in sport can have both positive and negative effects. As a result Christians should be cautious about how heavily they rely on the moral benefits of sport as a defense of its practice.

The physical, social, and moral benefits provided in sport have praiseworthy aspects that Christians should embrace. However, as we have seen there are also negative expressions in these same areas. What I am calling the Rortian view is most clearly evident in the instrumental view just discussed. Christians frequently cite the development of certain habits (for better or worse) as the reason to participate in or avoid sport. It becomes, then, a simple means to achieving some other end. Depending on whether

74. Page, *God's Girls*, 28.

the moral aspect of sport is viewed positively or negatively it is either a way of becoming a more virtuous person or a more sinful person.

My conclusion is that these arguments fail to give consideration to the internal qualities of sport. They are either incompatible with one's value system or they may be accepted if they can produce a desired result. That is, one is a negative view that condemns sport as immoral or a waste of time. The other is a neutral view that assigns value to sport only when it leads to some external good.

The moral approach to sport defended in the previous chapter, which sees sport as a social practice with its own internal goods, rejects all three of the dominant views that have been employed by the church. Through each of the next three chapters I will demonstrate three necessary steps that will help in our development of an account of sport that is more adequately informed by Christian theology. These include reconciling Christian ethics with participating in sports, recognizing our human limitations as foundational to the nature of sport's purpose, and recovering the spirit of play in a sports culture driven by the corrupted desire to win above all else.

SAMPLE