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# Introduction

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EVERY DAY MILLIONS OF people around the world concern themselves with sport. They watch it on television, read about it in various media outlets, and in many cases participate in it themselves. From young to old, sport has captured the hearts, minds, and bodies of people the world over. It is a worldwide phenomenon that is no respecter of age, race, gender, nationality, or socio-economic status. Sport is everywhere. Which is why it is interesting that one is not likely to find many Christian theological treatments of sport. It seems to be a reality that theologians tend to be as uninterested in the ideas of sport as athletes are about the finer points of Christian doctrine.

Yet, it is my assumption that Christians are to be actively engaged in the culture around them and so the absence of Christian thought in the sports world signals a failure of the Church to be salt and light to the world.<sup>1</sup> Sport is an activity of growing importance in many cultures and therefore merits serious theological reflection. My goal is to challenge Christian athletes and spectators to gain a richer understanding of how their faith offers formative principles to guide their attitudes and behaviors as well as provide spiritually meaningful reasons for participating in sport. In doing so I hope to offer a theological contribution to the burgeoning field of sports ethics and open the door to further theological inquiries of sport.<sup>2</sup> As an example of practical application I will give particular reference to the ethics of doping. The theological conversation about sport presented in this thesis will

1. Matt 5:13–16.

2. I do not intend for ‘sport’ to be perceived as any particularly defined athletic activity except where I am using specific examples. By sport I am going to mean very generally the idea of sport as it encompasses all forms of athletic competition.

contribute an alternative viewpoint to the current ways of approaching the ethics of enhancing athletes.

Throughout this book I will demonstrate how the prohibitionists rightly reject doping but could strengthen the argument against it by incorporating a theologically informed understanding of sport. The first chapter will discuss the three key arguments as they are typically expressed in attempts to show the problematic nature of biotechnological enhancements in sport. These common challenges include the notions that doping is a form of cheating, a means of coercing other athletes, and unjustifiable based on the health risks presented to the athletes.

Doping proponents believe they have sufficient answers for each of these arguments and thus believe they have won the debate. However, my contention in this chapter is that if proponents of doping win this battle, it is not because their arguments are stronger, but in part due to the thin structure of the debate itself.

It has been argued by proponents of doping that the disquiet over the biotechnological enhancement of athletes as currently expressed is reducible to a bioethical concern for the health of the athlete. Prohibiting such enhancements will no longer be a justifiable position when the health risks are minimized.

However, this places the debate over performance enhancing substances firmly under the jurisdiction of medical ethics and has nothing to say about sports, *per se*. What is needed, I will suggest, is a consideration sport's fundamental purpose. Therefore, in addition to highlighting the major points of contention in the debate I will call for a more detailed examination of the nature of sport and the goods being sought therein. It is here that we find a starting point for addressing the deep-seated divide that exists between those who wish to allow doping in sport and those who do not. The purpose of the first chapter is to demonstrate that the current theoretical framework for considering ethical issues in sport is insufficiently prepared to address the deeper problems facing the contemporary sports culture.

Chapter 2 begins the inquiry into the nature of sport by discussing different ways in which the basic values of sport have been understood. In other words, is sport purely a subjective value, where its meaning is created by and for only those participating in the sport, or does sport contain some transcendent value(s) identifiable by all rational beings? Much contemporary philosophy of sport literature seeking to answer this question draws heavily on the work of one of two philosophers. The community-based theories of Alasdair MacIntyre and Richard Rorty, respectively, have been the most influential in identifying and contrasting values within competing societies. Each promotes an interpersonal relationship with other participants

to arrive at a moral perspective of social activities such as sport but, as we will see, they are marked by extreme differences.

On one hand sport may be viewed from Alasdair MacIntyre's description of social practices. However, before accepting a general account of sports as MacIntyrean practices we must overcome two significant challenges. One objection to viewing sport as a practice is the insufficient justification of moral normativity and the other is MacIntyre's reliance on Aristotelian virtues. However, I shall argue that neither critique proves capable of rejecting a categorical description of sport as a social practice.

The second approach is the American pragmatism of Richard Rorty. The two major influences Rorty has had on moral conceptions of sport are an ethnocentric/anti-essentialist view of human nature and morality and the clear separation of the public and private sectors. The chapter will conclude by resurfacing one of the challenges presented to both views. Critics of each of the authors point to the potential for cultural relativism. I will conclude that this is a much more serious problem for Rorty. A Rortian view of sport reduces the activity to nothing more than a form in individual expression and thereby actually serves to undermine the community-oriented nature of sport as an activity that speaks to who we are as human beings. Ultimately, a Rortian view cannot see the intrinsic goods of sport qua sport but rather makes sport a means to some other end thus violating the internal consistency of the practice.

Therefore, between the two dominant philosophical views of sport I will suggest a MacIntyrean framework of social practices is a more accurate description of sport and provides a structural theory for the Christian account of sport presented throughout the rest of the book. However, Christianity has not always adopted a positive view of sport. In fact, Christian opinions on sport historically have fallen into one of three categories. The church has advocated variously (i) a view that sport is insignificant, (ii) the view that it is immoral, and/or (iii) a view that it is instrumental to other goods. Chapter 3 looks into these approaches to sport and offers critical analysis of the church's emphasis on each.

Though there are several biblical references to sport, these have been understood as mere analogies for the spiritual life and provided no substantive guidance for believers in the area of sport. In fact, some key figures in the early Church expressed extreme opposition to sport based on the idol worship, immoral behavior, and the anti-Christian mentality commonly associated with games and sport. Tertullian and Augustine were two of the more prominent Christian leaders to chastise those involved in sport with Augustine rejecting games as something which attracted his "attention away from

some serious meditation.”<sup>3</sup> For him, sport was at best irrelevant and at worst an obstacle to the higher calling of the church. The insignificant view and the immoral view are the two most frequently found in early Christianity.

With the exception of some prominent nineteenth-century Puritan leaders, the church slowly began to accept sport allowing a number of games to become common practice in theological circles. Rather than being a deterrent, sport became viewed as a tool for enabling spiritual growth. The physical activity associated with sport refreshed the soul and improved stamina for both Christian service and meditation. The door to this view was opened by Aquinas as he defended the need for physical and mental relaxation to rejuvenate both body and soul.

As a result, sport came to be seen primarily as an instrument in service of the spiritual life. The instrumental view was realized in full force during the mid nineteenth century when sport became a vehicle for drawing men back into the church. The Muscular Christianity movement was used as a tool to combat the perceived feminization of the church and though the movement itself was short-lived it fanned the flame of the new paradigm for a theological treatment of sport that still enjoys widespread support. Sport in the church has, as a result, often come to be seen as a resource for ministry. In other words, it is a means of evangelism, moral education and community development, and physical exercise.

This instrumental understanding of sport, while not necessarily misplaced, does not speak to any intrinsic value of sport. Here I will argue that whatever contribution theology has made to sport lacks complexity and depth. Certainly, there have been immoral practices associated with sport and sport often serves as an instrument to some other good but the value of sport reaches much further than this. Such a thin view of sport fails to recognize the created goodness of games which God intends for humans to enjoy, not as a means to “serious” work but as a fundamental source of enjoyment and human flourishing.

To arrive at this theologically informed view of sport it is important for Christians to take three key steps. We need to reconcile Christian ethics and sport, to remember the human essence of sport, and to recover the play element in sport. Each of these steps will be investigated through three sequential chapters.

Chapter 4 takes the first step by providing a theological analysis that seeks to develop a more robust theological framework from which to understand sport. This chapter will answer the three major challenges to Christian participation in sport in an effort to reconcile participation in sport with

3. Augustine, *Confessions of Saint Augustine*, X. 35, 241.

Christian practice. Despite the typically negative sentiment historically held by the church I will suggest that the purpose of sport complements and is harmonious with the Christian life. Even among its many pitfalls sport can be reconciled with Christian ethics. These three objections include problems in competition, adulterous or negligent views of the human body, and the morally corruptive influences prevalent in sport.

One serious problem for sport from a Christian vantage point is the apparent inescapable mind-set of putting one's self before all others. Can the attitude encouraged in sport of winning at the expense of others, gaining the upper hand and glorifying the strength of the human body be compatible with the Christian maxim of putting one's neighbor before oneself, not to mention the Christian virtues of meekness and humility?

Sport's tendency to elicit hyper-competitiveness often leads to a second challenge to Christian ethics and sport. The desire to "win at all costs" seems incompatible with the Christian tradition of putting others before oneself. The motivation for victory over others not only produces selfishness and pride but also typically results in one of two attitudes toward the body. Either athletes neglect proper respect for the dignity of their bodies or they idolize their bodies in a corrupted form of self worship.

The final major challenge facing the reconciliation of Christian ethics and sport is the negative influence many sports have on a Christian's moral behavior. The argument is often used that sport develops character but the statistics seem to suggest sport has the opposite effect. Violence, drugs, and scandals covering the sports headlines makes one question whether sport develops or corrupts Christian values.

I will argue that all three of these apparent conflicts have merit but many of the negative conclusions about sport's amplification of these sinful behaviors are based on faulty assumptions about sport. These corruptive influences are not indicative of sport as much as they are of the more innately corrupted individuals and institutions surrounding sport. Christian qualities can be expressed through participation in sport, though reconciling the two will certainly challenge Christians to reevaluate their involvement in some sports where our complacency in corruption is unbecoming of the values we strive to uphold.

A second step toward a theological account of sport calls us to remember that sport is most fundamentally a human activity, built upon human qualities. In chapter 5 I will argue that a Christian conception of sport is one based in creation. Sport is part of God's design for human flourishing. It is a gift to be enjoyed but unfortunately the prevalent view in the contemporary sports culture continually seeks to find ways of going beyond our physical limitations.

After critiquing the modern culture of sport for its “win at all costs” mentality I will suggest a new paradigm that more fully appreciates the humanness of sport. Recognizing our humanity is a central component in the development of a Christian ethic of sport. Instead of praising only the biggest, strongest and fastest we as Christians are challenged to recognize our physical limitations. My view rejects the idea that winning is the primary standard of excellence. Being the best is not always as important as doing one’s best. It is the striving in sport, the effort of being human, that stands to be most depreciated in the current culture of competitive sport.

The human essence of sport is often best captured in the striving for excellence. I will use Special Olympics as a case in point. These athletes do not have the fastest times, the farthest throw, or the most technical form, especially when compared with professional athletes, but that does not mean their activity is less sporting. The mixture of effort, aspiration and talent provides the normative paradigm for sporting values.

The beauty of sport is that it demonstrates our mutually dependent human finitude and the possibility of astonishing physical accomplishments at the same time. Theology in sport calls us to recognize both dimensions. Sport stirs up admiration for both natural giftedness and human effort. The standards of excellence and the striving to achieve them surpass the sports culture’s overemphasis on the outcome of one’s effort.

The third step needed in a theologically informed approach to sport is to recover the play element in sport. In chapter 6 I identify play as the core component of sport. I will investigate the connection between play, games and sport. Tying this into the conclusions from previous chapters we can see the human essence of sport in the fact that play is an essential part of being human. There are instances where sport neglects the play element. My argument is that when this happens we are already headed down the path of taking sport too seriously. This usually occurs in the form of winning at all costs, a position we have already established as incompatible with Christian ethics. This is one reason why it is important for Christians to recover the spirit of play.

Engaging in sport without the spirit of play is a sign that we are taking the game too seriously but it also hints to the possibility that we do not take it seriously enough. This paradox is explained by the fact that play is a basic component of human flourishing. The pursuit of play is an intrinsically intelligible act that is characteristic of our humanness. It is what John Finnis calls a basic good. Play, therefore is intrinsically valuable and when we participate in sport without the element of play we are omitting a very significant portion of what God intended sport to be.

The topic of work is one which has received significant theological treatment, particularly from within the Protestant tradition. However, noticeably little attention is given to the topic of leisure. Chapter 7 will be the final chapter. There I will suggest the relationship of work and leisure carries great importance to the theory of sport I maintain. Thinking in this field by Catholic theologian Josef Pieper provides a helpful reorientation of our attitude toward the two activities.

Pieper claims that leisure is not merely a separate aspect of life but rather an all encompassing approach to life. The prevalent attitude of the Protestant work ethic has it backwards. Leisure, not work, is the basis of culture. To say that play is merely rest from and for work is to devalue the significance of play as a fundamental component of human flourishing. More importantly, the purpose of leisure is not a means of preparing for work but a form of worship. Play is an expression of gratitude to God who gives the gift of sport. Viewing leisure in terms of divine worship requires that we first follow the three steps outlined in the previous three chapters.

We must reconcile Christian ethics with sport by eliminating immoral sporting attitudes and activities. We must recognize sport as a deeply human activity that is given its meaning within the context of our physical limitations. We must recover the spirit of play in sport and see athletic activity neither as a trivial form of entertainment nor as a means to some external end but as an expression of who we are as human beings—an expression filled with grace, gratitude and a spirit of worship.

When we have arrived at this view of the theological purposes underlying sporting activity we find ourselves in a position to return to the concerns about doping in sport. From the attitude of grace, gratitude, and worship doping becomes incompatible with sport since the goals of sport (from a Christian worldview) and doping are fundamentally incommensurate. Sport intrinsically aims at a number of internal goods that are not advanced by employing enhancement technologies. This suggests that neither the sport itself nor the individual's moral or spiritual well-being stand to gain by sanctioning doping in sport. The only reason for its use is to advance a self-serving goal which undermines the basic good being sought by sporting practices.

This will by no means definitively clarify the blurred moral vision many sports ethicists concern themselves with in determining which substances should be allowed and which should be prohibited and why. My claim seeks to alleviate many of its problems by stepping back to ask what the purpose of sport is in the first place. What is or is not a natural behavior in sport is a secondary concern that can best be viewed in light of sport as a human expression of God's grace and our gratitude. From this starting point

we will not only have dissolved many of the issues in doping but will have a clearer understanding of the more troubling issues underlying doping to gain a competitive advantage. More importantly, I hope to initiate a fruitful dialogue that will engage pastors, theologians, athletes, and fans from many theological traditions on the question of what it means for Christians to participate in sport well played.

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