

# Sports and Success in the Light of Christ.

## ABSTRACT

Modern day sport disseminates and transmits values which are not always congruent with the Christian faith. The relationship between sport and religion within the context of success has implications for Christology. Jesus is modernized, muscularized and turned into a modern day sports hero. This reconstruction is made possible when the Jesus of history is separated from the Christ of faith. The sports-religion relationship also has implications for the image of self. Our success rather than our relationship to Jesus Christ becomes the platform for our spiritual testimony. This image of self also needs to be challenged in light of the overall gospel witness.

*The most important thing is not to win but to take part, just as the most important thing in life is not the triumph but the struggle. The essential thing is not to have conquered but to have fought well.*

*Baron Pierre de Coubertin.<sup>1</sup>*

*For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.*

*I Timothy 4:8*

Sport has emerged in modern society as an vehicle which transmits social values.<sup>2</sup> Sport as a social institution permeates

1 Baron Pierre de Coubertin, cited in Jim McKay, *No Pain, No Gain? Sport and Australian culture* (Victoria: Impact Printing, 1991), p. 37

2 Etymologically, sport is historically associated with a sense of 'turning aside,' 'distraction,' being an abbreviation of *disport* - amusement or diversion. While this is helpful as far as the historical

and mirrors many levels of society and 'influences such disparate elements as status, race relations, business life, automotive design, clothing styles, the concept of the hero, language, and ethical values'.<sup>3</sup> In other words sport provides a means of expressing some of the dominant values of society, such as success, hard work, discipline, health and fitness, and character. It needs to be pointed out that values of society as reflected in sport may be contradictory. For example, the emphasis on competition and athletic success may lead to the use of undue violence to intimidate the opponent, or likewise, cheating, and the use of illegal drugs to enhance one's performance. Such behavior not only raises ethical questions, but, it is inconsistent with the development of character through sports. Shirl Hoffmann, a professor of Physical and Health Education and an evangelical Christian, argues that the relationship between sport and religion can likewise create contradictory values:

Christian athletes confront an inevitable contradiction. Sport which celebrates the myth of success is harnessed to a theology that often stresses the importance of losing. Sport which symbolizes the morality of self-reliance and teaches the just rewards of hard work is used to propagate a theology dominated by the radicalism of grace (the first shall be last and the last shall be first). Sport, a microcosm of meritocracy, is used to celebrate a religion that says that all are unworthy and undeserving.<sup>4</sup>

Success, winning, the need to excel, are all values of society accentuated by sport. Such values, however, are not always congruent with the Christian faith. The focus of this essay is on

concept of sport is concerned, it needs further clarification as to define what modern day sport has come to embody and mean. Sport can be defined as 'any institutionalized game demanding the demonstration of physical prowess.' Loy, McPherson, and Kenyon, as cited in E. Synder & E. Spreitzer, *Social Aspects of Sport*, Englewood, p.17.

3 Boyle, as cited in Snyder & Spreitzer, p. 44.

4 Shirl Hoffman as cited in Brian Aitken, "The Emergence of Born Again Sport", p. 203

two fundamental areas of theology effected by the relationship between sport and Christianity within the context of success - firstly, the implications for Christology, and secondly the implications for 'self', that is where one gains a sense of worth and identity. The implications for these two areas naturally call for some sort of theological response. Once this has been done it then becomes possible to discuss how such a response might be implemented, although due to space considerations this is confined to an outline only.

This century has witnessed a great deal of Christian thought wanting to detach the 'Jesus of history' from the 'Christ of faith'. The question of the relationship between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith affects the heart of christology. The implications of the relationship go deeper still. 'There is an important and often quite unconscious connection between images of Jesus and images of the Christian life.'<sup>5</sup> For the essence of what makes a Christian is faith in Jesus Christ. 'And the one basic problem of christology is the statement, "I believe in Jesus".'<sup>6</sup> The growth evident over the latter half of this century of a symbiotic link between evangelical Christianity and sports in the Western world has prompted *Sports Illustrated* writer Frank Deford to suggest that we are witnessing the birth of a new hybrid religion which he has called 'Sportianity.'<sup>7</sup> What image of Christ has Sportianity created? 'The high priests of Sportianity stress winning, drive, discipline, hard work, and the benefits of victory for one's self and society. To modernize Jesus, especially within the context of sport, has been to muscularize him, often imposing upon him characteristics of a modern day sports hero.

The concept of 'Total Release Performance' (TRP) developed by Wesley Neal sums up the theology of

5 Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, p. 119

6 Ebeling, *G Word and Faith*, p. 201.

7 Frank Deford, 'Jocks for Jesus,' *Sports Illustrated*, April 19, 1976, p.95.

'Born-Again Sport'. Basically TRP involves giving all that you have in any athletic situation, using all your talent, putting forth the supreme effort. Jesus, in Neal's Christology, has of course given the perfect 'Total Release Performance'. The Garden of Gethsemane and the cross especially demonstrate Jesus' level of commitment to his mission and his winning character. As Neal puts it, 'At any point Jesus could have turned back from his mission, but he was a Winner.'<sup>8</sup> Deford does not fail to miss the implications of this when he writes, 'Jesus has been transformed, emerging anew as a holler guy, a hustler, a give it 100 percenter.'<sup>9</sup> In other words, the muscularization of Jesus has come about as Sportianity has separated the Jesus of history from the Christ of faith. The image of Christ is a sporting one, one of power and triumph. But is it acceptable to create images of Jesus in order to be culturally relevant?

One reason why some biblical scholars and other people have wanted to reduce the 'telescope provided by the gospels to either a kaleidoscope or an angled (and distorting) mirror'<sup>10</sup>, is the desire for relevance, perceived in terms of universalization. In their book, *The Mouth of the Dragon*, Adams and Salmon express the need to separate the 'image of Christ', as they call it, from Jesus. They identify many difficulties, as they see it, arising from what they express to be the 'essential and restricted connecting of the Christ image to the person of Jesus.'<sup>11</sup> Oral Roberts' statement reflects this from a sporting perspective:

Athletics is part of the Christian witness. Nearly every man in America reads the sports pages and a Christian school cannot ignore these people. Sports are becoming the Number One interest of people in America. For us to be relevant we had to gain the

8 Wesley Neal, as cited in Brian Aitken, 'The Emergence of Born-Again Sport'

9 Frank Derford, 'Jocks for Jesus,' *Sports Illustrated*, April 19, 1976, p. 100.

10 N.T.Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, p. 94.

11 Adams & Salmon, *The Mouth of the Dragon*, p. 119.

attention of millions of people in a way they would understand.<sup>12</sup>

The amount of TV and newsprint coverage given to sport in New Zealand suggests that sport holds an equally dominant position within this country. The immediate danger in separating Jesus from Christ in this way, is that the Christ image may then be filled with 'appropriate' content. 'If any reconstruction of "Christ" is going to be relevant as we move towards the twenty-first century,' Adams and Salmon argue, 'it will need to meet criteria being identified by feminist, liberation, and indigenous theologies.'<sup>13</sup> Their reconstructions therefore are likely to bear no resemblance to the Jesus of history.

A number of important theological observations on the relationship between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith can be made. Firstly, Paul, in his writings, connects the two words 'Christ' and 'Jesus', that in themselves have very different connotations and functions. Being accustomed as we are to seeing these two words together, we tend to overlook the theological meaning in the name 'Jesus Christ'. 'Jesus' is a proper name belonging to an individual who lived and died in a concrete place and time. In contrast, 'Christ' is not a proper name at all. Rather it is a descriptive term that basically means 'the anointed one'. The theological importance and significance of the name 'Jesus Christ', then, is that the two words are brought together. The danger lies in peoples attempt to separate the abstract term from the concrete name. 'Isolated from the proper name, the term "Christ" is an abstract honorific into which people can project all sorts of ideas and yearnings.'<sup>14</sup> But when the term is linked with the proper name 'Jesus' it loses its abstract air. The meaning of the term 'Christ' can be understood only through the concrete figure of Jesus.

12 Quoted in Jay Coakley, *Sport in Society*, St. Louis: Times-Mirror/Mosby, 1986, p. 322.

13 Coakley, p. 123.

14 Sabrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, p. 285.

Secondly, the relationship is one of continuity. Jesus the proclaimer becomes the one proclaimed. 'The genius of the Evangelists was that they rooted their own proclamation of the risen Lord in the words and deeds of the earthly Jesus and thereby gave concrete content to that proclamation.'<sup>15</sup> Whatever the intentions of the gospel writers, one of the effects was to maintain the identity of the exalted Lord with the earthly Jesus. If we try to isolate and separate the Jesus of history from the Christ of faith we are in danger of docetism, and committing ourselves to a mythological Lord.

We also discover an underlying unity of meaning between Jesus and the kerygma. One finds an underlying similarity in such paradoxes as: in weakness, power; death, life; in suffering, glory; in judgment, grace; in finitude, transcendence. 'It is this existential meaning latent in Jesus' message which is constitutive of his selfhood, expressed in his action, and finally codified in the church's kerygma.'<sup>16</sup> Let us take one example to illustrate this, that of weakness and power. When we divorce the Jesus of history from the Christ of faith, it becomes easy to view Christ himself as a figure of power. This in turn can lead to a one-sided theology of triumphalism. Paul, in writing to the Corinthians to counter this, must demonstrate that Jesus Christ is the supreme example of both weakness and power. He shows how these two virtues stand in a definite relationship to each other. 'For to be sure,' Paul writes, 'he was crucified in weakness, yet he lives by God's power' (2 Cor. 13:4). In other words, 'the cross does not exhaust Christ's relation to sin; He passed from the cross to the throne, and when he comes again it is as judge.'<sup>17</sup> The cross and the resurrection go together; Jesus displays both weakness and power.

15 Cook, *The Jesus of Faith*, p. 23.

16 Robinson, as cited in Cook, *The Jesus of Faith*, p 15.

17 Denny, as cited in Carson, *From Triumphalism to Maturity*, p. 175.

This leads us into our third observation. In this manifestation of dual virtues, Christ stands as a model for Christians. This is what Paul concludes as he writes, 'Likewise, we are weak in him, yet by God's power we will live with him to serve you' (2 Cor. 13:4b). Like all other believers, the apostle Paul lives this side of death; and therefore one principal sign of Christian existence will be 'the same kind of vulnerability that Christ himself chose to adopt.'<sup>18</sup> Paul gives a striking example of this in 2 Corinthians 4:7-12 in his discussion about treasure in jars of clay. Powerful life is primarily the prospect of the future; for although Christ has been raised from the dead as the firstfruits of believers, the believers themselves do not experience the same power to a similar degree until Christ returns.<sup>19</sup> Like Paul, we need to pursue not only the power of his resurrection but also 'the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death' (Phil. 3:10).

The relationship between sport and religion has not only influenced a sporting, muscularized image of Jesus, as a full-on totally committed winner, but has influenced the image of self, and where we find our worth and identity. Edward Deci and Bradley Olson<sup>20</sup> argue that although much of the direct and vicarious involvement in sport is intrinsically motivated, there seems to be an increasing amount of extrinsic force that is brought to bear on athletes. This reflects two competing ideologies that has emerged in modern day sport - the traditional amateur ethos that sport should be played for intrinsic reasons, in contrast to the professional ideology of sport which emphasizes the extrinsic rewards. Trophies and awards are often given to outstanding players, and these may be accompanied by cash prizes. In addition, there is considerable social pressure to

18 Barrett, as cited in Carson, *From Triumphalism to Maturity*, p 176.

19 1 Cor 15: 20-28.

20 E. Deci & B. Olson, 'Motivation and Competition: Their Role in sport,' in J.H. Goldstein, *Sports, Games, and Play : Social and Psychological Viewpoints*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, pp. 83-110.

play - indeed, to be the best. Immediate, extensive media coverage adds to this pressure. So for example, as Gary Smith has pointed out, children as they grow up they see older models attending sporting events, watching games on television, and reading about sports in magazines and newspapers. It is not surprising then that with so much attention devoted to sport the child soon learns that not only is sport important and worthwhile, but so is winning and success.<sup>21</sup>

Emphasis on extrinsic factors causes sport to become an arena for proving oneself not only to others but to oneself. Self worth becomes hinged on the outcome of athletic events and performance. Snyder and Spreitzer relate the 'emphasis in sport on achievement and success through competition, hard work, and discipline' to being 'isomorphic to the traditional value orientations of the larger society.'<sup>22</sup> The parades for the Americas Cup held throughout New Zealand in major cities is a powerful example of this. These served not only the purposes of the sponsors but publicly celebrated continuity with a claimed tradition of sports heroism in the international arena. Claudia Bell points out that many thousands of people attending the parades held no particular interest in yachting at all. Nonetheless, 'this was a rare event in that it claimed to be "for everyone". It supported easily understood and acceptable values: Pride in Winning.'<sup>23</sup>

David Wells argues that up until the twentieth century self had been understood in terms of character, 'of virtue to be learned and practiced, of private desires to be denied.'<sup>24</sup> Virtues such as honor, reputation, morals, democracy and integrity were all sustained by a belief in a higher moral law, a belief that rapidly began to deconstruct and disintegrate. There was a

21 G. Smith in Snyder & Spreitzer, p.53.

22 E. Snyder & E. Spreitzer, p.47.

23 Claudia Bell, *Inventing New Zealand*, p.15.

24 David Wells, *Losing Our Virtue : Why the Church Must Recover Its Moral Vision*, p. 97.



radical shift around the 1890s from character to personality. Where character is good or bad, personality in contrast is stunning, attractive, magnetic, and fascinating. 'Attention therefore,' says Wells, 'was shifting from the moral virtues, which needed to be cultivated, to image, which needs to be fashioned.'<sup>25</sup> It has resulted in a theology of accommodation, in which truth is traded for perception. Cultural historian, Jackson Lears, believes that this development 'was the beginning of a shift from a Protestant ethos of salvation through self-denial toward a therapeutic ethos stressing self-realization in this world'.<sup>26</sup> Sport perpetuates this shift from character to personality. According to Goffman, sports teams and coaches spend considerable time and energy in 'face work,' that is, in managing others' impressions of themselves so they can maintain a favorable image.<sup>27</sup>

The Christian response to this shift is not simply to try to return to an understanding of self in terms of character. Character can be good and virtuous and still a long way from God. Any Christian response to self must be linked to the fact that we are created in the image and likeness of God. Who we are can only be discovered in relationship to God. Jesus' image of himself – his self-worth and who he was – didn't depend on his success or having a stunning personality. Jesus' image was secure in his relationship to God and so he could treat everyone with dignity and respect. His character, as well as his personality, was an expression of his relationship to God.

The notion that God is glorified best when athletes have dedication, self-discipline, and give totally of themselves in striving for success and victory is central to the theology of Sportianity. As one advocate for Sportianity put it, no athlete, 'can afford to discredit Jesus by giving anything less than total involvement with those talents that he has been given in this

25 Wells, p. 97.

26 Jackson Lears, as cited in Wells, p. 98.

27 Goffman in Snyder & Spreitzer, p. 47.

training and competition.’<sup>28</sup> Higgs argues that ‘the idea of “success” is another name for “works,” which in our own age has come to include people who “play” in their “work” - that is, athletes - whose “success” provides the foundation for their spiritual testimony.’<sup>29</sup> He goes on to point out the irony here in regard to Protestantism itself. The verse that changed Luther’s life and the course of history was Romans 1:17, “the just shall live by faith,” yet in practice, Protestantism has embraced a theology of works of which the cult of success and Muscular Christianity are examples .

Modern theology has dutifully provided the justification for the success driven mentality of Christians, and especially when this value is related to the world of sport, as seen, for example, in John T. McNeill’s essay “The Christian Athlete in Philippians 3:7-14.” The focal passage concludes with the much cited verse that has become the keystone of muscular Christianity: ‘I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.’ ‘What this chapter brings to emphasis,’ says McNeill, “is the sublimation in Christian experience to the athlete’s intense all-out effort.”<sup>30</sup> Paul, he says, would have been more excited about the resumption of the Olympic games in 1948 than many of us were, and ‘on a more spiritual level’.

McNeill not only fails to understand that Paul is using metaphors, but like many other commentators, and evangelists, trying to rationalize the link of modern sport and Christianity, he draws the wrong inferences. Metaphors contrast as well as compare, and what Paul with his metaphor of seeking the prize is doing, especially in 1 Corinthians 9:24, is contrasting what one ought to pursue - an eternal, spiritual prize, hence a gift - with what the athlete pursues - a material, temporal prize that may well become a dumb idol. Paul’s exhortation to ‘run a good

28 Dirkson, as cited in G. Sage, ‘Sport and Religion,’ in *Handbook*, p.152.

29 Higgs, p. 170.

30 John McNeill, as cited in Higgs, p. 106.

race' or to 'fight the good fight' when taken literally distorts, almost reverses, his meaning. It is worth noting that Paul's use of the prize metaphor does imply extrinsic rewards, which are eternal in contrast to the temporal. In other words a Christian response to an understanding of self will include both the intrinsic and the extrinsic value of being created in the image of God.

There is a legitimate theological question as to whether or not the Christian's life or that of anyone else should be the "intense all-out effort" symbolized by the athlete, as McNeill seems to think. In fact a common complaint of people in western society concerns the pressure of time and the pace of life. One survey discussed by Robert Banks reveals that almost four out of every five people in Western societies feel continuously or regularly rushed for time.<sup>31</sup> The consequences of this include, frustration, guilt, anxiety, nervous tension, physical fatigue and emotional burnout. There is a language of 'blessed assurance' throughout Scripture and Christian orthodoxy that is far less frenetic and fanatic. That some theologians and ministers place an athletic construction upon texts stressing strain and effort tells more about them and their time than it does about scripture, where Jesus encourages all those who are weary and burdened to come to him for rest, rather than physical exertion in contest.

In conclusion, then, it becomes evident that the success mentality of sport, and the value society places upon it is more often than not, contradictory to the Christian life. Firstly the very image of Jesus Christ is radically altered when placed within a sporting context. While sport provides a wonderful opening for sharing the gospel story, it does not justify, nor require, a reconstruction of the image of Christ. Jesus Christ must be proclaimed as the gospels reveal him, in both weakness and power, suffering and glory, in judgment and in grace, and in death and life. In such paradoxes is found Jesus Christ's relevance to any culture at any point of time.

31 R. Banks, *The Tyranny of Time*, p. 18.

The second point of contradiction is our adoption of a theology of works in contrast to a theology of grace found throughout the New Testament witness. This theology of works has caused us to trade the truth for perception, where our spiritual progress and self worth is based upon our success and achievements, whether it is in sports, business, academic circles or other areas of life. In a world caught up in an 'intense all-out effort' business-induced life, the gospel of Jesus Christ offers an oasis, a haven of rest. Before we can offer this oasis to others we first have to learn to live in it ourselves, through such disciplines as solitude, meditation and stillness. It is an oasis where our self worth and identity rests secure in what Jesus has done upon the cross. We are sons and daughters of God, citizens of heaven, from where we await a Saviour (Phil.3.20). It is faith in Christ through grace that grants us access, not our success or performance. This enables us to set our focus on things eternal, and develop character rather than personality without substance. When both character and personality are defined and developed in relationship to God we can proclaim the gospel with a voice of integrity. A voice that echoes the words of one who created a refuge, an oasis from a society driven by success; 'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light' (Matt. 11:28-30).

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