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**Robert Ellis**

## **'Faster, Higher, Stronger': Sport and the Point of It All**

This article traces the rise of 'modern sport' since the middle of the nineteenth century and notes both a corresponding decline in church attendance over the same period and the use of sport in the service of religious (missionary) ends. The author asks whether sport itself may be said to have any religious dimensions. Having answered in the positive, a theology of sport is sketched with the notion of self-transcendence taken as the key idea around which such a theology might cohere. Finally, some cautionary theological observations are made regarding sport – relating to such matters as the distorting effects of competition. Sport mirrors, and perhaps sustains, some problematic notions of class, ethnicity, and gender, and its commercialisation also raises questions of which the theologian should be aware.

### **Introduction**

In this article I will consider how it is that sport appears to have achieved its preeminent position in contemporary culture, and whether its holding of such a position carries any religious significance. Then I will move to some theological reflection on sport. The place that sport occupies in contemporary culture is such that it demands theological reflection. Sport is an all-pervasive cultural phenomenon, with its dedicated TV channels and celebrity stars, and its community projects and schemes aimed at increasing participation for health or social benefit. It figures in political discourse, and even pervades many sermons. Whatever this 'sport' is, it has quite a hold on the popular imagination and a dominant place in contemporary culture, and as such it demands theological reflection.

Yet despite this prominent cultural place now, there is a long history of negative responses to 'sport' from Christians and the church stretching back to the church fathers and vividly exemplified by the seventeenth century Puritans, who saw sport as a threat to Christian virtue and society. While formal theological statements tended to be negative in tone, however, for much of Christian history the relationship between the church and 'sport' has been more ambivalent – and frequently marked by opportunism on the church's side, whether in raising funds through traditional 'Church Ales' or seeking vehicles for missionary activity. Given this often negative, or, at best, conflicted, tone, the need for a thorough and new theological evaluation of sport has a sharper edge. Sport has been frequently appropriated as a vehicle for ministry by church and para-church groups (particularly but not exclusively of an evangelistic nature) in what often appears to be an opportunistic and uncritical way. This grows out of the new settlement with sport which was reached in the nineteenth century amid the birth of 'muscular Christianity,' and it is somewhat paradoxical that the enthusiasm with which such work is carried out often appears to have no cognizance not only of the church's traditional reservations regarding 'sport,' but also appears to take a particularly rosy view of sport as a contemporary phenomenon. Each of these concerns will, in different ways, hover in the background of this article.

## Defining 'Sport'

Definitions can be the bane of discussions of sport and play, but some preparatory work is necessary. In what follows I regard modern sport to be a bureaucratised form of play. It is important to distinguish between sport and play, as many writers who set out to offer a theology of sport actually stop short and offer instead a theology of play – thinking they have done one thing when they have actually done the other. Sport is a developed, bureaucratised form of play. Sport includes essential elements of play, but this play has become organised, routinised. I can play football in the park with my friends without being involved in sport in the fullest sense of that word. On my own I am simply kicking a ball around, or aiming at a target – this is hardly yet the sport of football (though it could be preparation for it). Even when joined by half a dozen friends (and on such occasions the numbers are invariably uneven!), with jumpers for goalposts, our version of the game (here a bridging concept between play and sport) is local and perhaps even unique: that bush is out of bounds, no one is offside, and we finish when the number of players drops and is unsustainable because of other commitments or exhaustion. But when we make a team and play other teams, possibly in competition, we are now playing by universalised rules on a pitch of standardised size and marking, and these rules are created remotely from our game in the parks – our game has become bureaucratised. As such sport is characterised by the rationalisation which Weber believed to be inherent in modern social relationships. Sport is what modern society has done to traditional 'sports' – the quotation marks are appropriate in order to indicate the merely relative identity of such activities with modern ones. Writers, including myself, commonly speak of traditional games like the early traditional versions of football played widely in pre-industrial Britain with huge teams, few rules and frequent serious injury, in terms of 'sport,' but while it is possible to trace continuity between (say) traditional football and modern 'soccer,' the dissimilarities are sometimes as great. The most striking thing about all such pre-modern 'sports' is their local nature – they are, in many respects, more like my kick-around with friends in the park than they are like premiership football, or even Sunday football leagues. Even so, these local park kick-arounds are probably far more like one another than traditional football games were several hundred years ago even in two neighbouring villages. While it is still helpful, with due caveats, to speak of such events as 'sports,' we do need to be aware of the flexibility with which we are using the word.

Just to add a further complexity, it is also true to say that most ancient 'sport' – and even medieval 'sport' – probably arose in the context of religious ritual. That is to say that not only the Olympic Games, but even Gladiatorial combat, and almost certainly traditional football in the middle ages, each had some ritual root. Where sports did not, they were almost certainly rooted in preparation for combat (though ritual and military roots may not be mutually exclusive). It is hardly any surprise that metaphors of faith and fighting still abound in the modern sports arena.

Defining sport is a difficult task, but in this article modern sport will be assumed to be a predominantly nineteenth century development. Some activities seem obviously to fit as 'sport' (eg football, track and field, baseball, crown green bowls) whereas others can arouse controversy (eg darts, chess, climbing, jogging). I have already mentioned 'game' as a bridging concept between play and sport, and some activities seem to qualify as games or as play, but are less obviously sport. It would be possible to use the whole of this article to explore these definitions - possible, but, for now, undesirable. Sport in the full, modern sense

of the word, is a phenomenon which we may trace back to the middle of the nineteenth century – though in certain cases, notably cricket and horse racing, the pedigree is longer. The early history of modern sport is driven by diverse factors but most sports begin seriously to be codified, bureaucratised, in the middle of the nineteenth century. By the 1830s the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge had regular organised events in boat racing, cricket, and billiards. <sup>1</sup> The first rules of football and rugby were encoded in the 1860s and 1870s, cricket's county championship began to take a shape which modern enthusiasts would find familiar, and so on.

## **Emptying the Churches and Filling the Stadiums**

According to Robin Gill, the high point of church attendance in post-industrial revolution Britain was marked by the 1851 Census. It is salutary to note that even then, after a period of sustained growth, it is likely that no more than 40% of the population (and quite possibly less) attended church. The trends thereafter are not uniform, but overall the graph goes steadily and depressingly down. In other words, at precisely the time when organised religion begins to go into decline, modern sports begin to exert their grip – and not just on players. Spectatorship had long been a feature of cricket, but soon the number watching major events would balloon. In about fifty years from 1872, the FA Cup Final grew in popularity and significance such that its attendance went from 2,000 to 300,000 – the latter a common estimate of the chaos at the first Wembley final in 1923. <sup>2</sup> The phenomenon of spectatorism is an inherent part of modern sport, and in this article I will be thinking both about the sport that is played and the sport that is watched – and the relationship between the two.

In the waning of organised religion and the waxing of modern sport we have reason to ask whether sport in any sense flows into a cultural space left by religion. Of course, religion remains resilient in various ways in our culture and, as a number of contemporary sociologists point out, a decline in organised religion is not necessarily the same as a decline in religion *per se*. However the coincidence of these two trends still seems worth examination. In what follows I will first address the religious (or quasi-religious) aspects of the phenomenon of sport. Then I will sketch some indicators for a positive theological evaluation of sport – identifying in doing so a central concept around which I believe a theology of sport may cohere. I reiterate that what I will be looking for here is a theology of sport, not of play – a different task, but one often confused with it. Finally I will look to sound a number of more cautious theological notes.

## **The Religious Nature of Sport**

Defining 'religion' is doubtless as hazardous as defining sport, but it has been defined in terms both of its substance (beliefs, for instance) and in terms of its social or psychological functions. I am not convinced that these two definitions can be entirely separated, but there does seem to be evidence going back into the nineteenth century that sports begin to take on for some people the substantive characteristics of religion. The movement known as 'Muscular Christianity' is implicated in this. If one considers the Victorian poem *Vitai Lampada*, for instance, one might discern a kind of proto-spirituality which shows that sport has begun to generate, or express, a whole way of looking at life and the world. *Vitai Lampada* was written after the heroic performance of the heavily outnumbered British army at Abu Klea in 1885 on their way to an unsuccessful attempt to reinforce Khartoum. The second stanza makes explicit reference to details of the battle. The refrain 'Play up! Play up!

And play the game!' connects the kind of selfless Stoicism of cricket at Clifton College where the poet Henry Newbolt was educated with the qualities necessary to win a war. But the poem also shows us how playing a sport can shape the way that life in general is viewed.

*Vitai Lampada* ('They Pass On The Torch of Life')

There's a breathless hush in the Close to-night –  
Ten to make and the match to win –  
A bumping pitch and a blinding light,  
An hour to play and the last man in.  
And it's not for the sake of a ribboned coat,  
Or the selfish hope of a season's fame,  
But his Captain's hand on his shoulder smote –  
'Play up! play up! and play the game!'

The sand of the desert is sodden red –  
Red with the wreck of a square that broke;  
The Gatling's jammed and the Colonel dead,  
And the Regiment blind with dust and smoke.  
The river of death has brimmed his banks,  
And England's far, and Honour a name,  
But the voice of a schoolboy rallies the ranks –  
'Play up! play up! and play the game!'

This is the word that year by year,  
While in her place the School is set,  
Every one of her sons must hear,  
And none that hears it dare forget.  
This they all with a joyful mind  
Bear through life like a torch in flame,  
And falling fling to the host behind –  
'Play up! play up! and play the game!'

*Sir Henry Newbolt (1862-1938)*

Sport may be being used here as the vehicle for ideology imported from elsewhere, but the metaphors of sport could also be said to have come to exercise a shaping influence on that ideology. This seems, in short, to be rather more than an opportunistic use of sporting imagery. 3

The religious function of sport seems easier to demonstrate. Allen Guttman suggests that sports arouse in us similar emotions to those evoked by Bach or Matisse. For some people sport is as close as they get to any aestheticism. He goes on: 'the line between sport and art wavers uncertainly. The line between sport and religion is equally hard to draw.' In fact, according to Guttman 'many sports spectators experience something akin to worship.' 4

According to the Catholic theorist Michael Novak, sport exemplifies all the major facets of religion. Religions begin with ceremonies, often performed by surrogates on behalf of the adherents, they wear sacred vestments and the action is highly formalised, there is

concentration and intensity. These kinds of comparisons between religion and sport are relatively commonplace. The highly ritualised nature of sporting action is obvious in Olympic races as well as Olympic medal ceremonies: everything about sport seems ritualised. Football crowds respond to the local cantor in singing their barbed but often amusing canticles; large numbers of Welsh rugby supporters, in a rather strange cultural association, will only ever sing hymns at rugby internationals. Clubs often encourage or promote the off-field liturgists: football teams frequently give their home crowd a shirt number in the match programme to indicate the way in which the crowd, though off-field, does not merely spectate but participates in and affects the action; musicians, like the drummers at London Irish rugby, are given pride of place in the Grandstand by club officials so that the liturgy goes well. 5

But Novak wants to say more than this. He argues that religion channels, dramatises and processes the human sense of danger and contingency. It puts us in the presence of powers greater than ourselves and its rituals give these powers shape. They make explicit the common dreads of human life such as ageing and dying, cowardice and betrayal, failure and guilt. 6 Much the same might be said of sport, he suggests:

...the underlying metaphysic of sports entails overcoming the fear of death. In every contest, one side is defeated... Defeat is too like death. Defeat hurts like death. It can put one almost in a coma, slow up all of one's reactions, make the tongue cleave to the mouth, exhaust every fount of life and joy, make one wish one were dead, so as to be attuned to one's feelings. 7

A sporting contest is a ritual conducted in the view of the gods, it is a waiting for thumbs up or down, for one side to live and the other to die... 'Each time one enters the contest, one's unseen antagonist is death', writes Novak. 8 Such sentiments may seem overwritten, but the real fan will recognise something in them. In a qualitative survey I conducted with almost 500 sports players and spectators there emerges ample evidence which testifies to the impact of one's team's results on mood and temper. 9

One effect of urbanisation during the industrial revolution was the breaking of the links between the population and the natural rhythms of the seasons. One does not need to construct an artificial idyll to suggest a closer connection between these rhythms in the countryside than in towns and cities. The labourer leaving the fields in the shadow of the parish church will have left behind two patterns of time: an acute awareness of the changing length of days, and a connection to a liturgical calendar which also gave shape to the year. In the industrial cities, as 'objective' chronological time claims priority (manifested in the gradual harmonisation of clock times), these rhythms recede to be overtaken by more unrelenting patterns of work. Sports, as they become established, re-inject some of these lost rhythms into life.

It is often pointed out that play (and so sport) generally has its own sense of time, and this is true at both macro and micro levels. 10

- At a macro level, sport provides annual rhythms through its defined seasons, and, within these seasons, particular points of focus and special meaning – whether it is 'the glorious twelfth,' third round cup weekend, Six Nations opener (or decider), Derby day, and so on. This calendrical rhythm is not the only one on offer to the

- modern town dweller, but it is one way in which the passage of time is marked and people relate themselves to a 'meaningful time' beyond the mere ticking of the clock.
- Within a game's micro time the concentration and creativity required remove the players from their chronological bondage. We might think here of the flow experiences defined by Hungarian/American psychologist Csikszentmihalyi in which individuals (or groups) are so absorbed in the experience of the moment that all else is forgotten – a moment which combines physiological and psychological elements. Csikszentmihalyi identifies such moments as a key to happiness and well-being, 11 and many a parent will recognise this absorption in expert players – children. There has been important work on flow experiences in sport, often related to the heightening of performance – driving faster, putting more consistently, etc. But religion too has received attention – meditation practices and intense spiritual experiences are said to be similar in nature. 12 Sport provides intense flow experiences in which the individual is released from chronological time to be utterly absorbed in the play of which they are part. It is never '4.30,' but rather the evening session of the test match, or twenty minutes to final whistle, the last race on the card, etc. In the special time of the contest chronological time as such ceases to matter, all that matters is the game's own clock. Some sports, such as baseball and tennis, have no time limits – they are played until they end. But even these have their chronological markers – the seventh inning, or the fourth set. In the game, ordinary chronological time is not noticed, or not relevant.

Here's Novak again, paralleling religion and sport:

Sacred time is more like eternity than like history, more like cycles of recurrence than like progress, more like a celebration of repetition than like a celebration of novelty. Yet sacred time is full of exhilaration, excitement, and peace, as though it were more real and more joyous than the activities of everyday life - as though it were really living to be in sacred time... 13

Alongside such experiences ordinary everyday activity appears humdrum, and sports men and women report being 'in the zone,' or 'needing the buzz,' of being totally immersed in the moment – no wonder work can be a let down, 14 and retirement a challenge. 15

Allied to sport's sacred time there is also its sacred space. Elite sporting venues are storied places, and no contest takes place in an historical vacuum – always there is a comparator, a precedent, a record, a story awaiting a new chapter. These venues take on special characteristics – Manchester United's Old Trafford is the 'theatre of dreams', and Liverpool FC place the inspiring message 'this is Anfield' above the exit from the players' tunnel. Wimbledon, Augusta Georgia, St Andrew's, Wembley, Cardiff Arms Park, Yankee Stadium, Lord's – these are not mere pieces of real estate but special places, holy to their pilgrims. Increasingly sports spectators experience these 'holy' venues through television – with the commentator a kind of mediator between the rawness of the event itself and the extreme highs and lows of spectator experience, perhaps mitigating for some the 'death-like' experience noted by Novak.

The repeated insistence from some that sport be 'put into perspective,' that we realise that it is 'only a game,' needs comment. Catholic comedian Frank Skinner, an avid West Bromwich Albion fan, recalled going to watch the local derby against Wolves one Sunday lunchtime.

An evangelist chided the passing crowd for going to the game on the Lord's Day. 'You should be worshipping God, not enjoying yourselves,' he urged. Skinner was bemused: 'Enjoying ourselves? Enjoying ourselves?! Does he think we enjoy this? He doesn't understand at all.' The contest on the field is often referred to in terms of the *agon*, the conflict. But spectators, in complex ways, compete in this *agon* vicariously. The word is close enough to agony to indicate Skinner's real experience. While a film, a play, or a novel, can lift our spirits, disturb or distress, mere entertainment rarely strikes this deeply. For the fan, and indeed for the adrenalin-seized player, the game does not entertain: it drains or elates, satisfies or subdues.

The process of identification which is at work here has often been studied. <sup>16</sup> But identification with a team <sup>17</sup> can form an important part of an individual's identity. Athletes are then not just entertainers, and people identify with them in an almost priestly way <sup>18</sup> as they exemplify deep meaning. As superstars they no longer belong to themselves and are no longer treated as ordinary human beings. These and other considerations which space does not allow us to explore encourage us to think of sport as fulfilling certain quasi-religious functions.

## Sketching a Theology of Sport

The place to begin to speak about a theology of sport is with the concept of play – the challenge, as I have indicated already, is not to stop there. Play has generally been defined as an autotelic activity, something which has an end in itself – and so can also be described as unnecessary, superfluous. To put it slightly differently, play is intrinsically valuable. It is illuminating to read John Macquarrie's discussion of play in his *In Search of Humanity*, a discussion pursued under the heading of 'art'. Self-consciously wrestling with his own dour Protestant-Calvinistic heritage he contrasts play with work, suggesting that work is the truer purpose of humankind, and play is its necessary foil. He defines it as an end in itself which is similar to artistic expression, though less likely to produce 'serious' contributions to our understanding of the world than a novel or a painting. <sup>19</sup> An excess of play, contends Macquarrie, would lead to boredom, <sup>20</sup> but play nevertheless has its indispensable place. But if play is indispensable to human life we might legitimately ask how unnecessary it really is.

Play is not a purely human phenomenon. Our cocker spaniel, though no longer a puppy, wants to play every morning: she brings me something to tussle over as soon as I am downstairs. When she was younger the play was more intense, more prolonged, and sometimes a tad more reckless. Canine behaviourists tell us that this play was in part about learning boundaries, but also important for the process of socialisation - as well as just running off energy. Play does seem to have indispensable developmental aspects for animals, including human beings. Children, we may suppose, play at length because it is part of their growing, as important as good diet. Such considerations place at least a qualification against all attempts to talk about the superfluity of play. But what about adults and play?

We might want to press on and examine the difference between human and animal play. Scripture's creation narrative is the locus for much theological rumination about human / animal distinctions, and the concept of *imago Dei* is of particular interest. While there is no absolute consensus on the meaning of *imago Dei*, creativity is often regarded as an aspect of God's image in humanity. <sup>21</sup> God the Creator creates creative creatures in *imago Dei*, and



this creativity has clear associations with play. The human being 'creates a world' in playing. The game is entire to itself – whether basketball, scrabble, or secret agents – and those playing are candidates for the flow experiences which will absorb and renew them. Boundaries are created or observed (that line is out of bounds, this cupboard is HQ) and the freedom of play is exercised within them. Sport, as bureaucratized play, hardens these boundaries in particular ways and those who play sports give themselves over to the givenness of the rules in order to exercise their freedom within agreed boundaries. In one sense, sport may appear to represent a corruption of pure play because the players do not set their own rules or create their own world. But in another sense it is more truly creaturely: for human beings do not set their own boundaries either, even though they push at them. The human creative task is to work as sub-creators within the givens, and this is precisely what the sports player does in refining and extemporising on a repertoire of moves to express their own creativity within the limits of their sport. It is a profoundly human enterprise.

Some religious traditions speak of God's act of creation as a kind of play too. As well as Hindu notions like *lila*, the divine sport, 22 we might look to Proverbs 8:22ff which understands (in Moltmann's words) creation itself to have the 'character of play, which gives God delight and human beings joy'. 23 Says Moltmann, 'The creative God plays with his potentialities and creates out of nothing what is his good pleasure...'. 24 In the face of the terrible uncertainties of life, human persons can understand their relationship with God as a game God plays with them, just as through evolution creation is a game played with God, says Moltmann. 25

Play in general, and more particularly game-contests, most fully realised in sport, can serve as an analogue to this 'game of life.' But can we speak of sport as a kind of dramatisation, a ritual form, of this game? If so, it might also be possible to speak of participation in such sport as being a participation in God's playful creativity, or creative play, and therefore a participation in God's self. We might move from such a position to speaking of sport as a possible vehicle for an encounter with the Ultimate Player. This might also suggest that the 'goods' of sport are not coincidental. Muscular Christians believed sport was character forming in positive ways, and various research projects appear to substantiate this. 26 But if sport can be (though is not necessarily) a participation in God's playful creativity and even in God's self, then one might expect such goods to follow.

The trajectory of the creation narrative leads us to the Sabbath – the day of rest. On the seventh day God rests from his creative work, and God's people are also to keep this Sabbath. Play may be the foil to work, or it could be that towards which work tends. Play may be understood as part of the Sabbath rest, the goal of creation. Our discussion of the re-creative aspects of play, the flow moments, for instance, suggests that it might be spoken of in this way.

If we work with an Irenaean reading of the *imago Dei*, we will read the creation narrative as suggesting that human persons were not created perfect but in potential. The image of God is the potentiality of maturity and fullness, and human persons grow into this potential (or, indeed, slip back from it). This potential is also a growing towards God, which could ultimately lead to a communion with God which ancient writers often described as deification, and which echoed the way certain Scripture passages speak of growth in Christ. 27 There is in humankind, according to this understanding, a continual reaching beyond itself towards God. It is here that we may find the nub of a theology of sport.

The competitive experience of sport – whether it is the climber competing against nature and against herself, or the individual golfer attempting to best the course and other players, or the Super Bowl quarterback determined to win the great prize, or the jogger trying to defy the effects of his sedentary lifestyle – comprises the determination to be better, to be the best one can be. The Olympic motto is *Citius, Altius, Fortius* (Faster, Higher, Stronger) and it is a reminder of this desire for (self-) transcendence which appears to be part of sport's DNA. When the player tries to hit the ball well – timing a shot, curving a pass, finding the sweet spot – s/he is seeking an elusive and transient moment of perfection. The golfer who works on her swing, the soccer player dribbling in between traffic cones on the training pitch, and the Olympian sprinters, jumpers and lifters, all are pushing themselves to the limit, trying to go beyond themselves to a new realisation of this beautiful and effective moment. A research project undertaken in Oxford suggests that in some team sports the coordination of effective effort at key points brings particular satisfaction, and greater power to endure hardship. <sup>28</sup> There would seem to be a particular fulfilment in going 'faster, higher, stronger' with one's team mates.

Macquarrie argues that Heidegger's understanding of the human person as 'something that reaches beyond itself' <sup>29</sup> is rooted in Christian understandings of creation. According to this Irenaean interpretation of creation, human persons are not, as it were, ready-made as perfect in the image of God, but are creatures of potential, dynamic and reaching beyond themselves – most notably to God.

Sartre had understood this effort at self-transcendence as underscoring the futility of the human attempt to be god-like. But the French Christian existentialist, Gabriel Marcel, sees this dynamic of self-transcendence as more positive. Marcel says that humanity's inner need for transcendence must always include the possibility of having an experience of the transcendent. We might paraphrase as follows: experience of transcendence tends towards experience of the transcendent, God. <sup>30</sup> Here sport and play and theological understandings of them, are distinguished from one another. Sport always has a competitive edge – it is always a contest of some sort – against oneself or one's opponent, or even against some physical limitation or challenge. As such, sport (as opposed to play) always has inherent within it this effort at (self-) transcendence; it is always a reaching outward, upward, and perhaps we might say, God-ward. This pressing onwards and upwards can be understood in the light of the point already noted, that in creative play the player participates in the very play of God.

Irenaeus also remarked that 'the glory of God is a human person fully alive.' <sup>31</sup> Whether in the flow experience, or in some other thick description of sporting entanglement, the sportsman or -woman will often feel invigorated. There may be a chemical reaction here, as the body responds by sending good feelings coursing around its systems, but the sensation of striking the ball just so, achieving that target rhythm while running in the park, etc, will make even the very amateur athlete feel alive in a vibrant ways. <sup>32</sup> It is 'really living' to be in this 'sacred time.' It is this reaching beyond oneself which characterises sport rather than play. While this movement towards (self-)transcendence can form a central point for a positive theology of sport, we must move now from this brief constructive sketch to note also some more problematic aspects of modern sport.

## Cautionary Theological Notes

Speaking of sport as a moment of human self-transcendence, of a striving outward and upward, as a site of participation in the divine, sounds grand and full of noble possibility. The reality of sport, is, of course, more mixed.

Beginning where we have just left off, with the reaching outward and upward, I suggested that the competitive component of sport was a positive feature with theological significance. For some sports stars, continued adulation and celebrity, large amounts of money, and their own sense of confidence in natural ability, can lead to delusional tendencies in which ordinary rules do not seem to apply to them – they may feel that they transcend such mundane considerations. Transcendence relies on some sort of competitive instinct, even if only with oneself, but Christian writers through the centuries – including Tertullian in the shadow of the Roman arena, and the Puritan Phillip Stubbes in the 16th century – have seen more sinister significance in competition. <sup>33</sup> Tertullian saw it as literally a matter of life and death – of those who would push others into the lion's jaws in an effort to save themselves. Stubbes complained of traditional football that

it may rather be called a freendly kinde of fight, then a play or recreation. A bloody and murdering practice, then a felowly sporte or pastime. For doth not everyone lye in waight for his Aadversarie, seeking to overthrowe him and picke him on his nose, though it be upon hard stones, in ditch or dale, in valley or hill, or what place soever it be, hee careth not so he haue him down. And he that can serve the most of this fashion, he is counted the only felow, and who but he? So that by this meanes, somtimes their necks are broken, sometimes their backs, sometime their legs, sometimes their arms, sometime one part thrust out of ioynt, sometime another, sometime the noses gush out with blood, sometime their eyes start out: and sometimes hurt in one place, sometimes in another. <sup>34</sup>

No one escapes completely from such activities without being changed by it. The result is envy, malice, rancour, hatred, displeasure, enmity, contention, quarrel-picking, murder, homicide 'and great effusion of blood'. <sup>35</sup> Modern football seems sanitised by comparison, no doubt, but the drift of Stubbes's complaint will still strike a chord. The reverse, we might say, fallen, side of sport's constant self-transcendence is an unhealthy degree of competition. Over exertion leads to bodily abuse as well as rule breaking and a line is crossed between works and grace. Instead of a locus for participation in the divine, sport becomes yet another site where humanity dramatises its enslavement to darker forces. The ferocious, tribal edge this receives in many grandstands is the vicarious experience of this distorted transcendence, and it corrupts human communities instead of breaking down barriers between them. This tribalism also distorts the more positive ways in which sport underwrites identity for individuals and groups.

Sport, in fact, turns out to mirror human society in many ways. What is more complicated is assessing the extent to which sport reinforces these values, or, sometimes, contradicts or challenges them. The relation of sport to social class and race are interesting examples of this.

- While the elite schools were encouraging their pupils to 'Play up! Play up! And play the game,' down the road in schools for workers' children PE took the form of drill: how else could the cannon fodder be relied upon to obey orders? <sup>36</sup>

- In North America and Europe problems of 'stacking' and 'after life' cast doubts about the inclusivity of elite sport. 'Stacking' is the phenomenon which tracks the way in which black athletes tend to be deployed in positions generally thought to require pace and strength but not guile or tactical acumen. Relatively few black athletes have gone on to sporting careers after their playing days - still, out of the 92 football clubs in the so called 'top flight' in England and Wales, only two managers are black, neither in the Premier League. <sup>37</sup> It is also true that relatively few black players go on to media work.

The development of modern sports is crucially related to the education of socially elite males, and the sports were often violent in the early days. This roughness, and a stoic bearing of injury, was part of an ideology of masculinity that sport nourished. De Coubertin, the 're-inventor' of the Olympic Games, infamously said that the role of women in the Games was in offering applause for the accomplishment of male athletes. <sup>38</sup> Not until 1928 were women allowed to compete in track and field events, after his retirement from the IOC. Even in 2012 the London Games Committee expect 1200 men but only 800 women to participate in the track and field events.

Women still, on average, have sports participation and spectating rates lower than men. This may be because historically sport has been associated with masculinity, even if it is now a subtle and vestigial association. As Horne, Tomlinson and Whannel put it, 'women's identity, generally understood, does not easily include sweat, muscle, communal facilities, etc. The "ideal" male body is muscled; the "ideal" female body is not'. <sup>39</sup> Women who are competitive and strong at sports can be branded 'butch' or 'unfeminine.' Add to this the meagre coverage of women's sports in the media, and the rampant sexism which accompanies what involvement there is (see the recent Sky Sports scandal), <sup>40</sup> and a complex and sometimes unsavoury picture emerges of sport as a gendered discourse.

From the earliest days sport has been associated with money. It was the need to stabilise gambling that led to the earlier codification of rules in cricket and horse racing. Baseball has the longest history of direct commercial exploitation, but all major sports now are either deeply enmeshed with big business or they crave such entrapments. In some sports the relationship appears to threaten its independence significantly. The BBC estimated in 2004 that more than 80% of a Formula 1 team's revenue is derived from sponsorship. <sup>41</sup> It must also be said that commercial involvement has sometimes led to positive development in sport, and that the picture is not straightforwardly negative – but caution at least needs to be sounded.

An important factor in this financial dependency has been the role of the media, and television in particular. As TV increasingly shapes our experience of sports, it is responsible for a mimetic effect here. The competitive and technological values we see represented on the screen are internalised by viewers so that the behaviour (good and bad) of professional sports stars is reproduced domestically. The competitive father who urges on his son from the touchline, with colourful language and abuse of the referee, is migrating values which might be appropriate elsewhere into a sphere where they are inappropriate. Without realising it, he is mimicking elite sports. We need the best equipment to look the part before we can play our littler games, and TV plays its part in the commodification of sport too – sport and consumerism is another area for theological caution, as are the ones I have mentioned above.

These brief observations, generalised as they are, should indicate the need for caution in any theological assessment of, or Christian engagement with, sport. Mission agencies which engage sport in the name of Christian faith may be thought derelict in their duties if they ignore such considerations, concentrating instead on using sport as a vehicle for their message – and thus ignoring the way in which sport may both reflect and give credence to significant distortions in human relationships and self-understanding. Christians engaging with sport must ask questions about the effects of competition (even when that competition is only against oneself), and about the tribalism of sporting spectators. What might these potentially distorting features do to undermine participation in sports, or the use of sports as a vehicle for mission? While these issues are ancient enough to have worried Tertullian, it may be thought peculiarly modern to be concerned about matters of gender, ethnicity and social inclusiveness regarding sport – though taken more generally these issues also find interesting echoes in well established theological themes, and even biblical texts. While the effects of financial gain on sport and games may also have an historic pedigree, the effects of the media and the contemporary cult of celebrity raise new issues of which Christians who are engaged in sporting interactions need to be mindful. Sport may offer many opportunities for personal growth and social cohesion; it can also be seen as a lens which allows us to see more clearly many of the things which might concern us about our contemporary culture. It is certainly not simply an unalloyed boon. An adequate theology of sport certainly cannot ignore these problems even as it explores the possibility that sport might provide opportunities for fulfilment and even an encounter with the transcendent God: we hope to be faster, higher and stronger but with both eyes wide open.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Brailsford 1992: 89f

<sup>2</sup> See BBC, 'A History of the World – 1923 FA Cup Final Medal', online. [Accessed 16 February 2012] In 1872 at Kennington Oval the attendance was 2,000, rising to 23,000 at the same venue in 1891. In 1911 at Crystal Palace a crowd of 69,000 watched a drawn game, with 59,000 seeing the replayed game in Manchester. For the 1923 final the official capacity of Wembley Stadium was 127,000, but tickets were not sold in advance and chaos ensued. Some estimates suggest that 300,000 got into the ground (and perforce, filled the pitch as well as the stands) while a further 60,000 were locked outside

<sup>3</sup> These themes are explored further in my *The Games People Play* (Ellis 2012a)

<sup>4</sup> Guttman 1986: 177

<sup>5</sup> At the latter club's games, the pre-match rituals for the crowd follow a set pattern, climaxing in the singing of the team's song. But whereas this liturgy seems fixed, during the game the crowd is led to sing and chant as the circumstances seem to require in a more free-flowing, charismatic worship

6 Novak 1994: 30

7 Novak 1994: 47f. One might think here of former Liverpool FC manager Bill Shankly's famous line that 'football isn't a matter of life and death – it's more important than that.' Vince Lombardi (coach of the Green Bay Packers during the 1960s, for whom the Super Bowl trophy is named) said that 'winning isn't everything; it's the only thing.' This reflects, observes Novak (p46), that winning is not merely a matter of triumphing over one's opponent but carries a sense of having destiny on one's side, of being made a darling of fate

8 Novak 1994: 48

9 The results and analysis of this survey will be published as Ellis 2012b

10 See Peter Berger's discussion of play – which owes a good deal to Huizinga's important and influential treatment of the subject – as a signal of transcendence: Berger 1969: 76ff. See also Huizinga 1955

11 See Csikszentmihalyi 2002

12 Csikszentmihalyi refers to religion and flow: Csikszentmihalyi 2002: 76. While Eastern and mystical traditions often are discussed in this context, the characteristics of flow experiences mesh in other ways with various descriptions of religious experience

13 Novak 1994: 30

14 Though, as Bernard Suits points out, work too can be approached in 'game mode' (or, as he puts it, 'ludically'). Suits argues that any activity can take on the characteristics of a game. This is not meant to suggest that it is trivialised but rather that it becomes autotelic and absorbing and enjoyable – intrinsically valuable. As such it may involve more obvious 'game' features such as setting and reaching targets, or doing a set amount of work in a given time. See Suits 2005: 146

15 A number of professional sports stars testify to the difficulty of retirement without the adrenaline buzz of their previous occupation: Joe Calzaghe referred to 'the long days since my retirement from the ring' when speaking of his cocaine use (see 'Former Boxing Champion Joe Calzaghe admits using Cocaine' *The Daily Telegraph*, 27 March 2010 [accessed 8 November 2011].) Some sports professionals find such problems while still in the game – between rushes, as it were. See Carter 2009 for a sociological study of contemporary American footballers

16 Not least now that, in common with other aspects of modern life, fans' identifications are not always as obviously 'local' as they used to be – all those jokes about Manchester United fans living elsewhere come to mind

17 It generally *is* a team rather than individual sports players with whom such strong identifications are made

18 Novak 1994: 31

19 Macquarrie 1982: 192ff

20 Macquarrie 1982: 192. A view endorsed by Julian Barnes' imagining of golf in heaven: Barnes 1989: chapter 10

21 Cp, Novak 1994: 24

22 Macquarrie 1982: 187f

23 Moltmann 1985: 311

24 Moltmann 1985: 311

- 25 Some writers have gone on to speak of the play of redemption, or of grace. 'The Redeemer plays a wonderful game of love with the beloved soul, in order to redeem her in liberty,' Moltmann 1985: 311
- 26 For instance, see the work of Tess Kay, including: Kay 2006, Kay 2009a and Kay 2009b
- 27 See the discussion in Macquarrie 1982: 32f. Scripture passages include 2 Corinthians 3:18, 1 John 3:2, and 2 Peter 1:4
- 28 Cohen 2010: 106-108
- 29 Macquarrie 1982: 32
- 30 Marcel 2001: 46
- 31 Irenaeus: 4.34.5-7
- 32 'Pope John Paul II High School was founded in 2002 for the purpose of building Renaissance young men and women. We believe, with St Irenaeus, that "The glory of God is the human person fully alive." When students stretch to become scholars, when they strive to be the best singer, the best artist, the best athlete, the best person they can be, they glorify God by using the talents he has given them. Therein is their fulfilment and happiness. We want nothing less for them.' 'Catholic Educator', referring to Pope John Paul II High School, Nashville TN [accessed 28 February 2011]
- 33 'Competition is an indispensable element of sport... But competition also is the element in sport most difficult to align with the Christian faith', Hoffman 2010: 145f. Chapter 6, 'Christians and the Killer Instinct' is given over to the subject, and Hoffman's conclusions are downbeat
- 34 Tertullian 2004: chapter 23
- 35 Stubbes 1583: chapter headed 'A fearfull Iudgement of God, shewed at the Theaters'
- 36 Dunning 2005: 84ff
- 37 See 'Hideously diverse Britain: why so few black football managers?' in *The Guardian*, 20 September 2011, online [accessed 8 November 2011]: 'Ninety-two professional clubs. A quarter of the players are black. And how many black managers? Just two.'
- 38 His interview given to *Le Sport Suisse*, 7 August 1935, is widely quoted, for instance in Houlihan 2003: 41
- 39 Horne 1999: 115
- 40 Amanda Andrews, 'Sky chief speaks out against Andy Gray and Richard Keys' *The Daily Telegraph*, 27 January 2011 [accessed 9 November 2011]
- 41 See *BBC Motorsport*, 'Sponsorship Guide' [accessed 9 November 2011]