

THE SUNDAY TICKET:
FOCUSING ON CHRIST TO PENETRATE THE LOVE AFFAIR WITH SPORTS

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Abstract

Our culture celebrates sporting events more than church. America chooses to show more loyalty to teams than God, and this has shaped their lives around games instead of the Word. Sports are not an evil activity. However, anything can be dangerous when used too much because it makes a god out of it. This puts in danger a person's spiritual well-being. God says to glorify him with our actions and praise him in all activities we take part in. This thesis study will look further at the current mixing of religion and athletics today in America, the impact society has made on Americans by elevating sports, sometimes even over religion, and demonstrate how our churches can use the current cultural atmosphere to its advantage as an evangelism tool to share the truth of Christ crucified.

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1. Introduction

Throughout the world, headlines read, “Soccer is Religion,” “Is Baseball Sacred?”, and “Football is Our Religion.” Are these headlines just attention grabbers, or is there some truth to their message? A look into our current culture illustrates how important sport is to Americans. Channels running 24/7 devoted just to sports, discussing and analyzing every facet of every game. John Coleman, Professor of religion and society at the Graduate Theological Union, describes the American society he sees, “Art, science, philosophy, agriculture, manufacture, and business all play a much larger role in economy than sport.”¹ Much more matters in this world than just athletes. Sports are just games children play and adults enjoy. However, none of these other subjects “enter into men’s daily disputes or lay claim to basic loyalties in the way or to the degree that sports does. It is sport that catches the interest and elicits the devotion of both young and old, the wise and the foolish, the educated and the uneducated.”² Sport is unnecessary, yet people gravitate towards it. Their thoughts dwell on playing and watching sport. Their homes are decorated to celebrate their teams, and their lives revolve around sport.

P.S. Fredrickson wrote in the journal of Science and Medicine of Exercise and Sports in the 1960s, “There is no society known to man which does not have games of the sort in which individuals set up purely artificial obstacles and get satisfaction from overcoming them.”³ This is the basic definition of sport. A person or a team sets up obstacles, like a 10-foot hoop, a 26.2 miles course, a defense of muscular men, or a net. And then they make rules to restrict their movements within a confined space. If they succeed, they rejoice. If not, they try again until they do. The idea seems silly that some lines on the ground and a made up game can fascinate millions, yet it does!

Sport extends beyond the game. A spectator witnesses the emotion and the determination of players. In a sense, sport educates us by teaching moral lessons and pushes players to outsmart their opponents. Shirl Hoffman, Professor Emeritus of Exercise and Sport Science at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, writes, “Sports are pervasive. For millions of youngsters, sports are rites of passage, regarded by parents as important rituals for teaching

¹ John Coleman, *Sport* (Cambridge, Mass.:Harvard University Press, 1989), 1.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

lessons in discipline, hard work, persistence, and teamwork.”⁴ There is value in sports whether it is training to accomplish a goal, working to stay healthy, or teaching important life lessons. Sport has found a place in American society to do just that.

Sport’s social importance is unrivaled as a form of entertainment. Has it developed into more than something Americans enjoy? The amount of sports consumed on a given weekend is staggering. Hoffman reports, “On a typical fall weekend during the 2000 season over 2.5 million fans watched a sports event in person. This did not include the tens of millions glued to the sofa at home.”⁵ Those statistics were from 15 years ago and included the whole weekend of sports. Statista.com reports that now the average NFL game is viewed by 17.4 million people while other sports range from 0.5 to 1.4 million people for a normal game. If one would add up the viewers for a complete weekend with MLB playoffs, college football on Saturday, and NFL games on Sunday, the numbers would show that Americans value sports more than just a little bit. If somehow that does not impress you, the NFL championship was viewed by 108.7 million viewers just from the United States this past year.⁶ Sport goes beyond what Americans watch on television, “When a new American history text for 5th graders treat the Depression and the presidency of Franklin Roosevelt in 33 lines, but devotes 2 pages to the baseball star Cal Ripken, Jr., it is fair to say that sport has a firm grip on our society.”⁷

There is nothing wrong with enjoying sports and celebrating them. It is entertainment God has given us. However, sports are being placed in front of religion and that is a problem. Sports affect people mentally for longer and in a much deeper way than any other form of entertainment. George Steinbrenner, the historic owner of the MLB’s New York Yankees, confessed, “A lot of people depend on us [the Yankees] for their daily feelings. Our job is to make them happy.”⁸ A common phrase to exclaim upon winning a championship is that “I can now die in peace.” Robert Lipsyte, a sports journalist for ESPN, says, “The melting pot may be a myth, but we will all come together in the ballpark...A man must prove his faith in sports and

⁴ Shirli Hoffman, “Toward narrowing the gulf between sport and religion,” *Word & World* 23, no. 3 (2003): 304.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 305.

⁶ The Statistics Portal, “Number of TV viewers of major sporting events in the United States as of June 2014,” Statista. <http://www.statista.com/statistics/311949/number-tv-viewers-sporting-events-usa/> (accessed December 1, 2015).

⁷ Hoffman, “Toward narrowing the gulf between sport and religion,” 305.

⁸ Joseph Price, *From Season to Season: Sports as American Religion* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 2001), 4.

the American way by whipping himself into shape, playing by the rules, being part of the team, and putting out all the way. If his faith is strong enough, he will triumph.”⁹ Americans have placed sports in key aspects of their lives. The TV has to be the focus of the room to watch the big game. Schools need well-maintained sports fields next to the school to have parents interested. Lonnie Kliever, Professor of Religious Studies at Southern Methodist University, perceives that our culture wants one gigantic playground, one nation under play with sports and games for all. Many questions revolve around sports and religion. Do sports distract to the point of spiritual decay? What is sports educational significance and what other significances does it have? And what is sport to those who just want the satisfaction it gives?¹⁰ Fundamental to this discussion is where a person starts. When religion is taken out of sports, it results in idolizing human athletes and accomplishments. What a WELS Lutheran sees is an idol, if they are willing to admit it. There is value in sports when it serves you. Science has proven how exercise is used to keep people healthy, calm, resolve issues, and teach lessons. However, the cost of sport has to be considered, and how it is used has to be kept in check.

This thesis is a study of the relationship between sports, people today, and how God plays in. Are you serving sport or are you having sport serve you to praise God? The paper will examine if different sports are replacing God to make their own religion, or are athletics and religion merging to make their own pseudo-religion.

The results of this study will be used to look closer at how churches can use the current atmosphere with sports to its advantage and share Christ. This thesis will also provide firsthand accounts of Christian athletics at the top of their profession and how they view sport. Pulling knowledge from these athletes and from sports camps already being done in our circles, the thesis will give advice and encouragement to break up the love affair people have with sports and bring them to Christ. Sports can be used to the glory of God when the focus is put back on Christ.

2. A Study of the Cultural Landscape

⁹ James Mathisen, “American Sport as Folk Religion” in *From Season to Season: Sports as American Religion*, ed. Joseph Price (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 2001), 144.

¹⁰ Lonnie Kliever, “God and Games in Modern Culture” in *From Season to Season: Sports as American Religion*, ed. Joseph Price (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 2001), 39.

For our churches to know how to use sports, they first need to understand what is currently happening in our country and how sport has progressed to where it is today. First, this study will evaluate what Americans are loyal to, what shapes them, and what this means for the church. Second, the paper will briefly overview the history of church and sports to understand how American Sport functions today.

2.1 What Are Individuals Loyal to Today?

According to a pew report in 2012, two-thirds of Americans were under the impression that religion was losing influence in the country.¹¹ Why has this change been occurring? Are sports to blame? Before a definite conclusion can be made, this study needs to look at the common American. Who is this person? What do they think about, dream about, and make time for? James Smith, Professor of Philosophy at Calvin College, believes, “He’s the quintessential “modern man” constituted by this consumer world.”¹² Smith thinks his identity is shaped and fashioned by our culture and subconsciously acts according to his behavior and desires. Bain-Selbo, Professor of Philosophy and Religion at Western Kentucky University, produces a similar line of thought, “Intense group loyalties are part of being human.”¹³ If an opposing fan attends a rivalry game in the other team’s stadium, he certainly would describe the atmosphere against them as intense loyalty.

Sport is described as “both identity forming and identity revealing.”¹⁴ This is true for fans as well as athletes. “The object of fandom is intrinsically interwoven with our sense of self...as a matter of identification.”¹⁵ Our society often prides itself on where a person is from, and they take those loyalties with them. For example, if someone says they are from Green Bay, one would naturally assume they are a Packer fan. But it goes much further beyond that. Bob Heere, Professor of Sport and Entertainment Management at the University of South Carolina, suggests in his Group Identity Theory, “Fans of sports teams see themselves as members of an

¹¹Chris Beneke and Arthur Remillard, “Is Religion losing ground to sports?” *The Washington Post*, January 31, 2014, under “Opinions,” https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/is-religion-losing-ground-to-sports/2014/01/31/6faa4d64-82bd-11e3-9dd4-e7278db80d86_story.html (accessed December 1, 2015).

¹² James Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 105.

¹³ Eric Bain-Selbo, *Game Day and God* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2009), 41.

¹⁴ Shirl Hoffman, *Good Game: Christianity and the Culture of Sports* (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2010), 266.

¹⁵ Bain-Selbo, 44.

organization, not just consumers of a product.”¹⁶ He explains that individuals are able to develop relationships by being able to identify in a common way through sports. In other words, people have something to talk about and relate to. This was the church’s role, but “urbanization of the 20th century changed the living patterns of people, resulting in a mass-consumption society. In a modern city, relationships are less intimate. People experience their community through friends and informal organizations rather than through traditional venues such as churches.”¹⁷ Cheering on a team gives a sense of belonging, especially for a person in a new environment and does not know anyone in the area. Team affiliations can make bonds or tear friendships apart.

Frank Deford, a Sports Illustrated journalist, understands the powerful attraction sport has. He suggests, “If Marx had lived at the end of the twentieth century in the United States rather than in Victorian England, he would have declared that sports is the opiate of the people, anesthetizing them to the struggles of the classes and focusing their hopes on events that project fulfillment through a vicarious form of participation and through an often delayed form of gratification.”¹⁸ Calling sport an opiate of the people is a very striking image. This description suggests that Americans are addicted to sports in such a manner that they are unable to live without it. These games have affected every aspect of American life. Sport has integrated itself so far into American society that Mike Grimshaw believes we can now change “Will Herberg’s famous tripartite classification of American identity and religious life: Protestant, Catholic, Jew. Now, we can also add, sports fan.”¹⁹

How does this happen? When did this happen? Clearly Herberg’s classification, written in a religious sociology book from the 1950s, is outdated, but for sport to rise to the level of the divine is nothing to take lightly. James Smith explains, “We are what we love and love what we worship.”²⁰ What you worship from your beliefs and choices. In describing Sanctification, “God made us creatures of habit and God enables us to reform and reorient our habits toward him and his Kingdom.”²¹ If we do not worship God and worship sports instead, then our habits are turned

¹⁶ Bob Heere and Jeffery James, “Sports teams and their communities,” *Implicit Religion* 12, no. 2 (July 2009): 319.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Price, *From season to season: Sports as American Religion*, 34.

¹⁹ Mike Grimshaw, “From season to season: sports as American religion.” *Implicit Religion* 12, no. 2 (July 2009): 238.

²⁰ Baker Publishing Group. “How Worship Works: Implications for Practice - James K. A. Smith - Imagining the Kingdom,” *YouTube video*, March 11, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=69ybkrbExb4>

²¹ Ibid.

toward playing and enjoying a game. Smith calls sport and many other distractions in society, secular liturgies that rival our godly liturgy. He is concerned that we have “become habituated to ways of life that counter to what God envisions...By the quiet, unconscious operation of liturgical formation...we let these narratives and their metaphorical power seep into our bones...to dominate our ‘background’ and thus begin to shape our very perception of the world.”²² The secular liturgies in our lives have shaped how we live and penetrate our thoughts and decisions.

The devil works in such a subtle way to subconsciously pull a believer away from God. There is not one sport the church can target to bring their members and nonmembers back to God. “Through a vast repertoire of secular liturgies, we are quietly assimilated to the earthly city of disordered loves, governed by self-love and the pursuit of domination.”²³ Sport in its competitive form is the pursuit of domination over every other team. A fan’s identity is found in his team. His heart breaks in injury and defeat, but he sings praises in success. When the team achieves victory, the fan too has achieved victory. The problem is this loyalty to a team is not thought of as dangerous. “We toddle off to church or Bible study week after week, comforting ourselves that we’re devoted to the “temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the LORD” (Jeremiah 7:4), without realizing that we spend the rest of the week making bread for idols (Jeremiah 7:18) because we fail to appreciate the religious nature of these secular practices.”²⁴ Everything in this secular world can be used against believers. Satan even tried to twist the biblical word to use against Jesus when he tempted him in the desert. Clearly, the devil has accomplished something in our society. Our world is continuing to be more secularized. Lutherans need to be careful of how they operate in this world but take comfort that we find strength by going back to Christ. However, studies show that not to be the case. Americans are loyal to pets, their hometowns, their sports teams, their family, and church comes in almost last if it is mentioned at all. Smith sees Christian worship as our way of intentionally decentering to call us out of ourselves and the earthly things we hold onto to come back to our Lord.²⁵

2.2. A History of the Church and Sports.

²² James Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*. 141.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 149.

From the very beginning of the world, God was very clear on where sports and everything should fit, behind honoring the Lord. People are told not to worship idols and were shown they have no value. They are made of sticks and stone and have no impact in this world. The Apostle Paul describes something much better in 1 Corinthians 9:25, “Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever.”²⁶ God has given his people salvation, the crown of life through his Son’s redemptive work on this earth. Yet sin has continued to corrupt this world and influence man’s beliefs. Already by 381 A.D., the archbishop of Constantinople, Chrysostom, noticed people lacking in their faith as seen in his 58 Homily, “If you ask Christians who is Amos or Obadiah, how many apostles there were or prophets, they stand mute; but if you ask them about the horses or drivers they answer with more solemnity than rhetors.”²⁷ Throughout history, sport had its way of captivating the mind and shaping what a person believed to be important.

This was true for Martin Luther too. Sport in the Catholic Church during the Reformation “had been so entangled with the liturgical calendar and religious celebration that reformers found it almost impossible to distinguish between the two.”²⁸ When the Reformation occurred, the split served as a separation between sports and religion. By association, Lutherans rejected these festivals with sports being a part of them, for it felt too Catholic. Luther himself did not dislike sports; he just valued them as long as they were useful. He said, “The ultimate objective is to keep us from lapsing into the other activities – drinking, wenching, gambling – as we can already see happening in our courts and cities.”²⁹ Luther viewed sports as something that could serve God’s people, but his view is far from celebrating them outright.

The Lutheran Church in early America remained cautious of sport at the beginnings of our country. Sports were thought to be associated with sinful activities and had no place in American society. The Washington post reports, “Spiritual leaders have long feared that religion and sports would vie for loyalty – and that sports would win. Before the Civil War, clergymen and devoted lay people regarded sports as needless distractions and gateways to moral

²⁶ 1 Corinthians 9:25 (NIV2011).

²⁷ Sean Freyne, “Early Christianity and the Greek Athletic Ideal,” in *Sport*, ed. John Coleman (Edinburgh, Scotland: T & T Clark, 1989), 93.

²⁸ Shirl Hoffman, *Good Game*, 73.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 74.

dissipation—clear competitors for sacred time and attention.”³⁰ These thoughts of sport were common at the time and staunchly upheld by the Puritans. In the 17th Century, a puritan named Thomas Hall said, “Gaming was among the surest means to debauch a people, and draw them from God.” These people certainly understood the dangers of sport being elevated too high. Even more so, they recalled why they came to America in the first place, “We came into this world not for sport, a Christian magazine opined in 1851, but for a higher and nobler object. The fact that sports were often played on the Christian Sabbath made them all the more damnable.”³¹ The church walked carefully to avoid any temptation of the faith. Even when an activity had positive aspects to it, if there was any connection to sinful behavior, the church prohibited further involvement with the activity.

Times soon changed and sport slowly became accepted by society and some churches. Charles Prebish, Professor of Religious Studies at Penn State, describes this saying, “By 1800, America had cast off the Puritan opposition to sport, and collectively began to realize that a life of physical inactivity was a liability rather than an asset. The American YMCA was founded in Boston in 1851, followed in 1858 by a YWCA chapter in New York.”³² Even if the churches weren’t ready to play yet, the people certainly were. This new organization was used as an evangelism tool; much like the church is seeking to use sport today. “The YMCA sought to form young men into good Christian citizens by offering not only a wide variety of athletic opportunities but also Bible study sessions, worship service and prayer groups.”³³ The YMCA was founded at the right time because the transition of American’s interest in sport was exploding. “Sport was beginning to stamp its imprint on the American character; the country was on the threshold of an era some historians call ‘the golden age of sports.’ Olympic Games, boxing matches, basketball and volleyball were invented, while ice hockey from Canada, golf from Scotland, tennis, bicycling all mushroomed. Madison Square Garden opened in 1879 with seating for 8,000 spectators.”³⁴ The YMCA found a niche they could use to bring people into the

³⁰ Chris Beneke and Arthur Remillard, “Is Religion losing ground to sports?” *The Washington Post*, January 31, 2014, under “Opinions,” https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/is-religion-losing-ground-to-sports/2014/01/31/6faa4d64-82bd-11e3-9dd4-e7278db80d86_story.html (accessed December 1, 2015).

³¹ Ibid.

³² Charles Prebish, “Heavenly Father, Divine Goalie,” in *Sport and Religion*, ed. Shirl Hoffman (Champaign, Ill: Human Kinetics Bks, 1992), 43.

³³ David Nantais, “Playing with God – religion and modern sport” *The Christian Century* 125, no.1 (January 15, 2008): 45.

³⁴ Hoffman, *Good Game*, 99.

church and share God's Word with them. Immigrants arriving in America used sports to integrate themselves into communities and assimilate into the American way of life.³⁵ As a result, immigrants were coming into churches that supported sports and were given Christ. New sports were being created and celebrated in numbers never seen before.

Not everyone was quite sold on sports just yet. In 1892, the United Methodist Church joined together for their annual meeting and made this statement, "The Western Conference of North Carolina described football as 'a source of evil, and no little evil and ought to be stopped.'"³⁶ Sports were still seen as something that walked hand in hand with crime, gambling, and outlandish behavior. At this time, the Methodist Church in North Carolina published articles in their magazine, the Raleigh Christian Advocate, "criticizing athletics at Trinity College"³⁷ comparing it to gladiatorial contests of ancient Rome, Spanish bullfights, and the criminal class in general."³⁸ Bothering the Methodist Church was not the brutality of the sport, rather how the game symbolized "materialism, fanaticism, modernity, and liberalism; it showered attention on the body and unjustly glorified it."³⁹ This religious body had a domino theory that play began in a small sin and snowballed into greater and greater sin.⁴⁰ The belief at the heart was sport is an addiction slowly corrupting your thoughts and morals. Play that seems innocent and fun pushes the individual to want more, need more, and gradually sport drives them. Their domino theory feared the worst, but it was unable to prevent the increase of sport in America.

By the turn of the 19th century, sports mania was sweeping across the country. "As love for big-time sports wove its way into the American social fabric, Protestants began to show signs of shaking off their suspicions, gradually becoming more optimistic about sport's place in the Christian life."⁴¹ It is hard not to agree with them. Sports were fun and certainly did not look evil. However, this sudden switch was not pushed by the leadership in the churches, but by its

³⁵ Nantais, "Playing with God,"45.

³⁶ Hoffman, *Good Game*, 94.

³⁷ Trinity College is the forerunner of Duke University.

³⁸ Hoffman, *Good Game*, 94.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ The most innocent game croquet leading to perdition in 12 easy steps. – 1. A social party. 2. Social and play party. 3. Croquet party. 4. Picnic and croquet party. 5. Picnic and dance and croquet party. 6. Absence from church. 7. Imprudent or immoral conduct. 8. Exclusion from church. 9. A runaway match. 10. Poverty and discontent. 11. Shame and disgrace. 12. Ruin

⁴¹ Hoffman, *Good Game*, 99.

lay members. “No longer was the sport and amusement dictated by ministers and theologians.”⁴² What else could pastors do, so they joined the masses and began to enjoy sport. Joseph Price, the Professor of Theology at Whittier College, references issued statements like William Manning’s⁴³ from the 1920s to demonstrate the mindset at this time, “Clean, wholesome, well-regulated sport is a most powerful agency for true and utmost living... Few things have done more harm than the idea that religion frowns upon sport or is out of sympathy with it.”⁴⁴ Abruptly churches wanted Americans to know that they were on board because they did not want to lose touch with the people.

This game of catch-up started a much more dangerous snowball effect. Pastors began to concede God’s Word. A Presbyterian preacher once wrote, “While the Bible lays down great and essential principles to control practical life, it leaves their application to the circumstances of particular person, the demands of each age, and the judgment of the enlightened conscience.”⁴⁵ This view of the Bible crept into American thinking not only because of sport but because of the overall secularization of its culture. The church was losing its grasp; the Methodists had the biggest reversal of losing all its suspicions of sport in less than 50 years. The *Christian Advocate* now encouraged “to seek opportunities directing play and competition: Don’t fail to capture some of the summer athletics for your church. We need to keep play wholesome, clean and Christian, just as much as we need to keep civic or industrial life Christian.”⁴⁶ The church in America simply rolled over and let sport rule the day. They knew their defeat was at hand. “Facing a gathering stampede to sports events, many churches feared being trampled in the dust and threw up their hands and adopted an ‘if-you-can’t-beat-‘em, join-‘em stance.’”⁴⁷ They feared to no longer be relevant, and “few experiences were thought to be more effective shapers of character than sports.”⁴⁸ America was trying to find itself. People thought life had to be better, more elevated. Society brought about a kind of perfectionism and millennialism idea to “purge

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ William Manning was the Episcopal Bishop of New York from 1921 to 1946. He led a significant financial campaign for the Cathedral of St. John the Divine.

⁴⁴ Price, *Season to Season*, 25.

⁴⁵ Hoffman, *Good Game*, 99.

⁴⁶ Price, *Season to Season*, 23.

⁴⁷ Hoffman, *Good Game*, 102.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 104.

human society of all its evils,” “reclaim society,” and “form a holy community” through sport because the young Americans trusted it.⁴⁹

The church needed to act. They heard society’s call for sport and followed it up with various sports movements of their own. Behind all these movements were the motivation to keep men from sin. This was a great thing to do, but churches either started it with a faulty base or slowly went away from the focus being on God’s Word. Hoffman breaks down each of these groups in his book. Some of the movements include the Body Reform Movement in 1844, sports for character 1908, and sports evangelism preachers in 1896.⁵⁰ Billy Sunday, a famous evangelist from American baseball, became the most popular figure in American religion at the time by witnessing to his faith.⁵¹ Another movement began around 1880; Muscular Christianity had its most influential beginning in Massachusetts. “By their consecrated lives and integrated lifestyles, they lifted sport to a new status; the combination of playing sports and serving humanity, while not necessarily new or exclusively American, was nevertheless carried out more visibly and with greater institutional endorsement than ever before.”⁵² This movement found great success in using sports heroes from a society that everyone already knew and loved to attract numbers.

One of the most well-known and effective groups referred to earlier was the YMCA. The Young Men’s Christian Association was formed in London in 1844, but it had one of its most significant events take place in 1891 at Springfield College. Dr. Luther Gullick, the head of the Springfield YMCA Physical Education gave James Naismith an assignment to develop a game in 14 days to play in between football and baseball season. Naismith came up with basketball, basing it off a game⁵³ from his youth. “Given the missionary zeal of the students involved in the YMCA, the game was soon being played throughout the world.”⁵⁴ This really was American Muscular Christianity at its finest. These men spread the game to gyms across the country with the thought of making relationships. Basketball served as much more than just a game, “It was a means to evangelize people about morality and Christian values... and provide a means to meet

⁴⁹ Ibid., 104-105.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 111.

⁵¹ Ibid., 130.

⁵² Tony Ladd and James Mathisen, *Muscular Christianity: Evangelical Protestants and the Development of American Sport* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1999), 58.

⁵³ Duck on a Rock.

⁵⁴ Ladd, 70.

both social and spiritual needs.”⁵⁵ Behind these movements was theological idea of forming a better society to quicken Christ’s second coming, ⁵⁶ so they mandated that Christians participate in this movement and the YMCA spread in popularity and power.

However, there was still concern by some in the church that this was a dangerous road to take. Billy Graham, a well-known evangelist, even went to the national council of the YMCA to encourage them to focus on reaching men’s hearts with the gospel first, before they try to change society.⁵⁷ Sadly, this is not the path they would take. The quick rise to success followed with a “gradual separation of the Y’s programs from evangelical theology. The mission of saving souls was gradually replaced with a vague sense of character enhancement.”⁵⁸ They found more success in developing people with sport through exercise, instead of sticking to the truth of Scripture. Americans saw what they could accomplish on their own without God. “They see sport, economics, science, and art having benefited and thrived from their secularization, set free from religious controls and purposes.”⁵⁹ Religious control over sport and culture was a thing of the past, and sport continued to trend away from the church.

As some groups faded in religious relevance, others began to rise up. Attempts were still made in America to use sport to connect with religion. Price describes the view of religion at this time without sport was “sterile rituals and stagnant beliefs.” He believed that a religion which loses touch and does not have the “ability to transcend the given conditions of social and personal existence remains a religion in name only.”⁶⁰ As a result, athletic ministries hit the scene even harder. In the 1950s, The Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) was formed using the successful strategy of letting famous athletes share their faith to gather a following. The FCA’s purpose is “to confront athletes and coaches and through them, the youth of the nation with the challenge and adventure of following Christ and serving him through the fellowship of the Church.”⁶¹ They were good at convincing people that life is better with Christ in their life, so accept him. This message struck a chord and they grew in numbers with their decision theology.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 71.

⁵⁶ Postmillennialism.

⁵⁷ Ladd, 74.

⁵⁸ Hoffman, *Good Game*, 118.

⁵⁹ Kliever, “God and Games in Modern Culture.” in *From Season to Season: Sports as American Religion*, ed. Joseph Price (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 2001), 43.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Brian Aitken, “The Emergence of Born-again sport,” in *Religion and Sport*, ed. Charles Prebish (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1993), 198.

The FCA is continuing to thrive. In 2015, they reported to having 94,505 coaches and athletes attending 619 camps with 9,978 making their first-time commitments to Christ.⁶² The next biggest sports ministry began in 1966 with the Athletes in Action (AIA). The AIA did more than just connect to Americans, it spread throughout the world. While the FCA is more focused on Football and baseball, the AIA had a broader reach of “involving 20 sports” and is “associated with and subsidized by Bill Bright’s Campus Crusade for Christ ministry. Their purpose is to use the ready-made platform of sports to share the adventure of excitement of following Christ.”⁶³ The AIA reported to have exposed the gospel to 7.1 million across the world from 2012-2013 and have 2,611 known decisions for Christ with 3,181 active relationships continuing.⁶⁴ Both of these groups have spread throughout America into high schools, colleges, and even professional sports team’s locker rooms. They have made ties with the biggest names in sport. These ministries use athletes to connect others with speaking engagements and their magazines to continue spreading their influence.

Despite the best efforts of these two ministries, religion’s influence continued to decline in the 1960s with televised sport. This was an exciting time for sports and fans, but televised sport pulled on their priorities. By 1976, Frank Deford wrote, “Now the trip out of the house on Sunday is not to visit a church, but to see a game or play one...So the churches have ceded Sunday to sports, to game.”⁶⁵ In the battle between sport and religion, “sport had not only won the battle for Sunday but for all other days as well. In sport religion, the Sabbath is every day.”⁶⁶

This history of the connection between Sport and Religion is valuable to understand. The dangers of sport are significant just as with any other secular activity. Sport went through a progression of being suppressed by the church, and the American society discovered it again and yearned for it. Sport was unleashed because of its fun and value, and many churches tried to harness it by sacrificing parts of their beliefs. They elevated the role of sports in the churches to a

⁶² The Fellowship of Christian Athletes, “2015:Undefeated Camps Impact Nearly 100,000,” The FCA, <http://timeline.fca.org/2015-undefeated/> (accessed December 1, 2015).

⁶³ Brian Aitken, “The Emergence of Born-again sport,” in *Religion and Sport*, ed. Charles Prebish (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1993), 199.

⁶⁴ Athletes in Action, “Athletes in Action: Annual Report,” The AIA, <http://www.athletesinaction.org/Media/Default/About/annual-reports/Annual%20Report%202014.web.pdf> (accessed December 1, 2015).

⁶⁵ Charles Prebish, “Heavenly Father, Divine Goalie,” in *Sport and Religion*, ed. Shirl Hoffman (Champaign, Ill: Human Kinetics Bks, 1992), 43.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

level they should not have and now they have to figure out what to do. The church's wholehearted jump into the sports world gave sports more support and essentially their blessing. However, now sport has become its own religion, and this recounting of history is made much more important. When there is a "trend of inserting sport into church programs today,"⁶⁷ there needs to be understanding of this history to not misuse sport. "As an open-group, open-door strategy, recreation and sport ministries may represent the most effective way to reach the postmodern culture of today."⁶⁸ With sport being as popular and dynamic as it is today, it makes sense to use that platform as many have before. But it is also important to recognize the mistakes of the past and the lines one should not cross to find success.

3. The Connection Between Sport and Religion Today.

The relationship between sport and religion has driven the research of this paper. Growing up as a pastor's son next to the church, religion was always there in the back of my mind, and the church itself was towering over the neighborhood. My time was always filled with playing games outside and experiencing sport firsthand. Playing was fun and exciting. It kept me active and out of trouble. Consciously, sport and religion feel connected as two good things that are a part of my life. A distinction remains between them which is often blurred. This distinction is often times challenging for our society to find.

Shirl Hoffman sees the religion and sport having little in common on the surface. Religion is much more serious and play more lighthearted, but at the same time, they have remarkable similarities. "Each stirs passions deep in the human spirit, and each can have profound and enduring effects on the individual and on society... Sport and religion seem comfortable with one another."⁶⁹ They do not seem to contradict each other. They teach similar values and give a sense of purpose to live. In the heat of the moment, sport finds something within man and makes a person feel alive. Adrenaline feels like an addicting rush, which man wants again and again. If sport becomes a god in someone's life, Lutherans know they cannot

⁶⁷ Hoffman, *Good Game*, 142.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Shirl Hoffman, *Sport and Religion*, (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics Books, 1992), vii.

serve two religions, yet when religion faces sport, “it is usually religion that gets shoved out of the way.”⁷⁰

One of my greatest concerns writing on this topic is facing feedback that I myself do not support sport. I fear to have feedback come back like Hoffman. After an ugly game, he wrote a letter to the players and coaches to clean up their actions on the court. His encouragement for what sport should be fell flat on his face. As a result, Hoffman became a curiosity because he was an athlete who appeared to be criticizing sports. Looking back on this he writes, “It was then that I realized how reticent the Christian community was to think critically about sports or to explore seriously how the sporting culture intersects with the spiritual path Christians claim to follow.”⁷¹ I never recognized sport as a threat to religion before doing the research for this paper. Recalling certain moments from my short career, I remember instances where I thought teammates and opponents had gone too far. I remember moments when I became too entranced with the game I played. The struggle is there for all athletes who play the game to not get caught up in the moment, to have it rule one’s thoughts. Is the church reluctant to take a hard look at this relationship or has everyone been duped by sport to not realize it is even a threat? Or is this line of thought simply not a threat in our circles? While these questions sink in deeper, let us take a closer look at the relationship of religion and sport in our society today.

3.1 How Sport and the Church Have Mixed.

As our nation has grown, religion and athletics have seemed to converge in certain areas. Looking at the history in the previous sections demonstrates how our situation today has come to be. Aitken calls it a symbiotic link that has them grow together. In fact, “Today most professional teams hold group devotions before games, and on televised post-game interviews it seems that almost all stars thank Jesus and their mother for their successes. Every sport appears to have its ‘athletes for Christ’; there is even a ‘Karate for Christ.’”⁷² Obviously, they have merged, but how do people observe this connection? Eric Bain-Selbo surveyed fans in America’s southern states if they have a religious experience on game-day. He refers to other surveys to say that Southerners are more likely to attend church than the rest of the country. Therefore, he

⁷⁰ Hoffman, *Good game*, XII.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Brian Aitken, “The Emergence of Born-again sport,” in *Religion and Sport*, ed. Charles Prebish (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1993), 197.

understands these fans are “hesitant to use any potentially religious expression to describe the game-day experience. To do so would be blasphemy.”⁷³ They see the connection and understand the argument, but they were hesitant to confess this of themselves. This is good! They understand they should have one God. But they do not connect what they know to how they are acting in regard to the game-day experience.

In Selbo’s survey, the people’s misunderstanding is made evident in the way they described their game experience in contrast to their verbal belief. These Southerners used religious descriptors, like emotionally positive and powerful, to express what they were feeling during the game.⁷⁴ Some fans prided themselves in their answers confessing that their football team is playing more than just a game, but a way of life in which their happiness depends on. Another fan said, “I guess it’s similar to church – sometimes you don’t really choose who to be for—you just are. For me, there was no moment of conversion. I was born into an Alabama family, and for that I’m thankful to this day.”⁷⁵ Selbo’s survey didn’t prove fans were having religious experiences, but he argues that this was not the point. The descriptions he took away from the situation prove sport has morphed into more than a game. Frank Deford, the Sports Illustrated writer says, “We are witnessing the birth of a new hybrid religion called ‘sportianity.’” Whatever sport has become, one can easily see how many live with sport as their religion, as an idol that affects their life. Whether one rejoices and has increased energy after a win, or sulks after a loss and is completely miserable, sport definitely has an effect to varying degrees.

Several modern theologians feel this is beneficial. Prebish and many others believe, “Religious experience in sport is open to anyone, at anytime, anywhere – just as it is in traditional religion.”⁷⁶ They see sport’s importance in changing lives for the better in adjusting morals and values, relationships and social involvements. It is interesting that they don’t differentiate the value gained depending on what the involvement of sport is. “It doesn’t matter whether this discipline is expressed by a daily twelve-mile run or three hours glued to ESPN. It

⁷³ Bain-Selbo, 70.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 71.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 72

⁷⁶ Charles Prebish, “Heavenly Father, Divine Goalie,” in *Sport and Religion*, ed. Shirl Hoffman (Champaign, Ill: Human Kinetics Bks, 1992), 51.

can be corralled and marshaled for good causes, both personal and collective.”⁷⁷ Now a vigorous exercise is going to have a different result than simply watching others play, but some theologians take this farther and believe sports drive godward. In fact, Catholic Theologian Michael Novak writes, “Among the Godward signs in contemporary life, sports may be the single most powerful manifestation.”⁷⁸ He finds the divine in sport and feels the game is a gift of God to bring his people closer to him. There is value in having access through sport, but what happens next? Sport provides a healthy lifestyle and connection to others, but if the connection sport has to religion is not taught, what does this lack of information lead to?

The current status of American religion is experiential. This causes theologians to link the positive experiences from sport to a divine experience. Catholic writer Thomas Ryan explains his view this way, “The Kingdom of God, in other words, is not a place, but an experience of intensity, quality, depth, ecstasy.”⁷⁹ An individual sits down to read their Bible and does not feel anything, but when they go for a run, they have this godly experience. They understand the meaning of the text and feel filled with the Spirit. Where is the real prayerful experience? The Augsburg Confession Article V explains how the Holy Spirit works faith where and when it pleases him according to his plan and timetable. The misunderstanding of the Holy Spirit’s work attributes it to a person’s experience. Shirl Hoffman refers to runner George Sheehan who describes running as “‘Purging and rinsing the inner man’ and showing ‘the good and true and beautiful.’ It was during a run, he said, that he came upon proof of the existence of God.”⁸⁰ American spirituality has led to people searching this feeling wherever they go and if they don’t find it, they simply move on to the next thing that does. They often find this feeling in some aspect of sport, whether it is the thrill of the big game, the peace given by playing, or cheering with thousands in unison. There is a need to educate so that people know where these feelings come from and what they mean.

The lack of education has led to elements of sport and religion mixing. Price has witnessed this relationship merge. “There is abundant evidence of the convergence and

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Michael Novak, “The Natural Religion” in *Sport and Religion*, ed. Shirl Hoffman (Champaign, Ill: Human Kinetics Bks, 1992), 36.

⁷⁹ Thomas Ryan, “Towards a Spirituality for Sports,” in *Sport*, ed. John Coleman (Edinburgh, Scotland: T & T Clark, 1989), 114.

⁸⁰ Hoffman, *Good Game*, 270.

confusion that have emerged between sports and religion in America in the late twentieth century. The blending has become enmeshed in everyday consciousness as the testimonies, rituals, and affiliations of players and fans have been portrayed in popular media, religious publications, and scholarly tomes.”⁸¹ This mixing can be traced back to the history of sport in the beginnings of it in America. With church being such a big part of their life, they took what they knew and applied it to sport. Roberto Cipriani, an Italian social scientist from Roma Tre University, outlines the similarities in his article, *Sport as (spi)rituality*. Americans honor God and superstars, praise the saints and champions, sing hymns and sports chants, join congregations and fan clubs, and put up churches and hall of fames.⁸² Many more parallels can be made to scribes and symbols of faith, but these all stem to how sport has progressed in America. “The organization and dramatization involved in sport follow religious schemata. The very origins of sport are to be traced back to religion, to its rituals and customs.”⁸³ Sport seems to have taken on aspects the people knew in churches, for they knew it worked as a structure. They built sport off this foundation and it has developed with parallel features to the church and religion. Sport and religion now continue to come back and play off each other because they can easily connect with their similar ideas and beliefs.

Sport feels comfortable for people with religious backgrounds because they both have similar causes. James Mathisen, a Professor of Sociology at Wheaton, brings these connections together explaining how religion and competitive sport help develop character and face conflict. He refers to this connection saying, “Novak also identifies sports with religion by remarking that both establish high standards of expectation, demand discipline, and strive toward perfection. Such pursuit of excellence creates and cultivates a climate of reverence.”⁸⁴ Both attempt to connect with the local communities and work outward to extend their reach. They strive to “generate a sense of identity” and “loyalty” through song and movement to have their members “interacting, fans and players unite as a single body.”⁸⁵ These common activities work to provide a reverence for the space, a sense of belonging for the people, and a cause they are united in.

⁸¹ Price, *Season to Season*, 16.

⁸² Roberto Cipriani, “Sports as (spi)rituality,” *Implicit Religion* 15, no.2 (June 2012): 147.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 149.

⁸⁴ James Mathisen, “American Sport as Folk Religion” in *From Season to Season: Sports as American Religion*, ed. Joseph Price (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 2001), 221.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

This is the situation we want, moving forward together. But we want the focus to be shifted to Jesus.

Efforts remain to keep Christ as the focus, but in doing so, there have been some troubling results. The AIA and FCA take advantage of the sports platform to share Christ. The top four priorities of these two groups are selling Jesus in the name of the game, sports sell, total release performance⁸⁶, and reinforcement.⁸⁷ But Brian Aitken, Professor of Religious Studies at Laurentian University, observes, “Pastoral concern is a low priority when the overall program of either organization is assessed....Their main concern is witnessing and conversion.”⁸⁸ This mixing of sports and religion troubles us because these groups seem to be spreading the Word of God with great success, but not supplementing that faith very well. They seem content with their role and do not want to risk their position. Frank Deford writes, “No-one in the movement, much less in any organization, speaks out against dirty play, no one attacks the evils of recruiting, racism or any of the other many well-known excesses and abuses.”⁸⁹ By not taking a stand against these sinful actions, they can maintain their position, but in doing so, they pick and choose what they wish to teach. They would argue that all these problems aren’t going to go away until these athletes know Christ. These groups have made “little effect on sport except to support the status quo. Its effect on religion, however, has been far greater. ‘Born-Again Sport’⁹⁰ has contributed to the ongoing process of secularization.”⁹¹ While sharing Christ is a great and godly thing to do, preaching Christ and not standing up for what he teaches does more harm than good. By supporting the status quo, society can point to these groups and argue that they support sport and how it is played now, so things should remain the same.

The greatest similarity in this relationship is completing losing oneself in the act of worship or play and having peace. Price helps to describe it as “the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that

⁸⁶ All out type of effort to show God thanks and shows a Jesus-level commitment.

⁸⁷ This is a religious remedy given to help the problems of this world and this support given through their full-time employees.

⁸⁸ Brian Aitken, “The Emergence of Born-again sport,” in *Religion and Sport*, ed. Charles Prebish (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1993), 204-205.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 207.

⁹⁰ Born-again sport refers to what kind of religion the AIA and FCA are promoting. Their decision theology combined with the success it will bring to provide a divine feeling.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 208.

people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it.”⁹² These moments can be found in worship during an uplifting sermon or hymn and also within the game, whether it is how hours fly by playing or in the last 5 minutes of the game one doesn’t notice half an hour has gone by. These occasions give a “feeling of awe and wonder, a deep sense of release and well-being, a feeling that everything is all right with the cosmos.”⁹³ While both can grant this sense of peace, where that peace is found is in two completely opposite places for most people. Religion is given peace in Christ, while sport can grab you “to enter a world where different laws apply, to be relieved of all the weights that bear it down, to be free, kingly, unfettered and divine.”⁹⁴ In sport is found an amazing similarity of passion that drives the individual to their goal. This can transform into a dangerous goal when the person loses track of why they are playing. In the mixing of sport and religion, the issue is trying to figure out what is behind that goal. Has this blending kept the focus on Christ or has sport mixed and gone beyond the Bible to focus on the individual and their success?

3.2 How Sport Has Used Aspects of the Church for its Benefit.

While sport and religion have mixed in American society, sport has also begun to fill the role religion once filled. “Examining the conditions by which Americans use sport and hero icons to fill religious and spiritual needs parallels the ways these needs have been historically satisfied by traditional religious experiences.”⁹⁵ Sport has established its own world where it gives the individual exactly what they are looking for. “By setting up boundaries and defining the space of the game, sports have helped Americans fit a grid to their own experience in order to define it and give it structure.”⁹⁶ In this structure, sport gives the order, competition, and virtues. But in society today, sport also provides something much more important. “Radical orthodoxy scholars view contemporary culture as yearning for a missing divine presence, and these scholars suggest that today individuals seek out the sacred in new and emerging cultural artifacts.”⁹⁷

⁹² James Mathisen, “American Sport as Folk Religion” in *From Season to Season: Sports as American Religion*, ed. Joseph Price (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 2001), 221.

⁹³ Brian Aitken, “The Emergence of Born-again sport,” in *Religion and Sport*, ed. Charles Prebish (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1993), 209.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 209.

⁹⁵ Andrew Meyer, “Radical Orthodoxy and Lance Armstrong: Shedding Light on Sport as Religious Experience.” *Journal Of Religion & Popular Culture* 24, no. 3 (October 2012): 449.

⁹⁶ Price, *Season to Season*, 35-36.

⁹⁷ Meyer, 453.

Modern sport fills the religious and spiritual needs people are looking for. Sport gives them a religion without it changing their selfish beliefs.

An interesting role-reversal has occurred in the United States. Americans are supposed to be tolerant of another's religion. While the passion to be able to defend the faith lessens, the Washington Post argues sport has filled the psychological and cultural vacuum. Culturally, it is looked down upon to defend your faith, yet a fan is able to root for their team "displaying unwavering devotion."⁹⁸ This role-reversal allows people to "love and hate in the most dedicated of ways."⁹⁹ The fan is able to showcase their affiliation proudly and not fear anything more than some verbal pushback, but they have the whole fanbase of their team behind them. Cipriani suggests there is "something religious about holas performed in stadiums, thousands of people moving in unison, like a congregation united in confession."¹⁰⁰ Sports fans join together in this confession to demonstrate loyalty and motivate towards victory. The atmosphere of sport has a great powerful feeling that goes beyond the individual, the feeling that this team, this game is bigger than one's self.

Sport feels big, which makes it seem special, but it lacks someone at the top driving everything forward without God there. When the religious rationale for playing sport is gone, the attention is shifted toward what the individuals can achieve and the records they can set. Hoffman sees this aspect of sport giving it a modern form of immortality.¹⁰¹ This also correlates with athletes looking for something more. They search for truth because they believe it will give them a reason to live a certain way. Athletes set goals to reach a certain milestone and Price believes "This quest for perfection arises out of the fundamental human dissatisfaction and uneasiness that constitute the human condition, but 'sports nourish this drive [toward perfection] as well as any other institution in our society.'" This motivation makes sense for those without religion because they are lacking something and trying to fill the void they have in their hearts with playing the game. They feel by trying to achieve more, they ultimately are trying to be at peace through what they have accomplished. "The root of human dissatisfaction and restlessness

⁹⁸ Chris Beneke and Arthur Remillard, "Is Religion losing ground to sports?" *The Washington Post*, January 31, 2014, under "Opinions," https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/is-religion-losing-ground-to-sports/2014/01/31/6faa4d64-82bd-11e3-9dd4-e7278db80d86_story.html (accessed December 1, 2015).

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Cipriani, 145.

¹⁰¹ Hoffman, *Good Game*, 268.

goes as deep into the spirit as any human drive—deeper than any other drive. It is the human spirit. Nothing stills it. Nothing fulfills it.”¹⁰² The athlete’s search for satisfaction is often called one’s drive to win. Sports work to nourish this desire, but it ultimately fails because there is always more one can accomplish. It can never truly fill the void

Calling sport a religion is not really possible because there are so many varying facets of the game. There is not a firm doctrine or structure one can nail down. The current practice is like ordering at Subway, the ability to choose what you desire for your own personal religion. Individuals come to sport to find what makes them happy and supports their lifestyle. The closest label for sport could be a folk religion, “for it not only reflects the beliefs and norms of a culture but also creates its own values and myths and projects them into the culture... Belief provides ritual, cultic practices that reinforce the values shared by a community of believers and evokes history and tradition.”¹⁰³ Sport has created an atmosphere around itself which reinforces beliefs individuals can grab onto if they desire to. They are able to find meaning in the memories they share with the team, they latch on to the team’s traditions and believe they are an integral part of the team. “Sport has long been regarded as a shaper and reinforcer of values deemed critical to the maintenance of American society.”¹⁰⁴ Because of the religious atmosphere and devotion to sport, “It is easy to understand why those who criticize sport often are suspected of harboring unpatriotic attitudes.”¹⁰⁵ Sport acts as the chief civilizing agent. Everyone on this planet is able to connect with sport.

It is so much more than just entertainment. Novak confesses that he watches prime-time shows to be entertained, but watching football is something completely different. “I don’t watch football to pass the time. The outcome of the games affects me. I care. Afterward, the emotion I have lived through continues to affect me.”¹⁰⁶ All too many of us can relate to this feeling of letting sport dominate our emotions and our time. Jordan Bergmann, a WELS lay member who played for the Wisconsin Badgers, gives a similar insight about sports taking away from the church, “Too often people get wrapped up in the outcomes of sporting events...Just this past year

¹⁰² Michael Novak, “The Natural Religion” in *Sport and Religion*, ed. Shirl Hoffman (Champaign, Ill: Human Kinetics Bks, 1992), 39.

¹⁰³ Grimshaw, 240.

¹⁰⁴ Hoffman, *Sport and religion*, 6-7.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Michael Novak, “The Natural Religion” in *Sport and Religion*, ed. Shirl Hoffman (Champaign, Ill: Human Kinetics Bks, 1992), 38.

it took me weeks to get past the Packers losing to the Seahawks. A game that in no way affects my life and is a blip on the radar in the grand scheme of things had such a significant impact on my life.”¹⁰⁷ Tim Mueller, who has started many sports camps in the WELS, also sees this issue come into family life. “Many families make sport a priority. They see their kids as college scholarships and pro players. Children are playing two to three different sports and go straight from school to multiple practices, and leaving for different states on weekends.”¹⁰⁸ He sees the current atmosphere as affecting children very negatively. He believes this “will hit society soon and definitely churches. How do you balance? Sports are seen as such a good thing, which it is in moderation.”¹⁰⁹ But when sport supersedes church on Sunday, religion has a problem.

Sport will not back down. “Sports are natural religions tended toward excess” and “provide an experience of at least a pagan sense of godliness.”¹¹⁰ Examples can be seen of this across the great spectrum of sports today. In 2010, the World Cup in South Africa had multiple prayers for the sport. “May a spirit of impartiality, justice and peace prevail among the players and all those involved, aimed at preventing, controlling and combating crime, corruption, hooliganism and all forms of violence and abuse, especially against the more vulnerable members of the community.”¹¹¹ Who is this prayer directed at? If anyone, in particular, it is aimed at the individual’s heart that they may behave in this manner. The Olympic Games take the experience even further and attempt to create their own religious ceremony with “the modern Olympics which, with their master of ceremony, celebrants, acolytes, and ecstatic public, pay the utmost religious attention to every detail of what this great liturgical event has to offer.”¹¹² Novak describes American sports stadiums as little more “than shrines for spiritual activity. Going to a stadium is half like going to a political rally, half like going to a church.”¹¹³ In the 1980s, “Monday Night Football featured advertisements for the Church of Monday Night Football.”¹¹⁴ In the 1990’s the *Atlanta Constitution* ran an ad saying, “Baseball is our religion.

¹⁰⁷ Jordan Bergmann, email message to author, November 13, 2015.

¹⁰⁸ Tim Mueller, phone interview by author, November 21, 2015.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ James Mathisen, “American Sport as Folk Religion” in *From Season to Season: Sports as American Religion*, ed. Joseph Price (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 2001), 143.

¹¹¹ Cipriani, 150.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ James Mathisen, “American Sport as Folk Religion” in *From Season to Season: Sports as American Religion*, ed. Joseph Price (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 2001), 145. Within Season to Season.

¹¹⁴ Price, *Season to Season* 35.

That stadium's our temple. The beer and peanuts, our sacrament."¹¹⁵ The sports season even resembles the religious calendar and celebrates these memories every year and with each New Year brings new life with the hope the team will finally win.¹¹⁶ "Fans, in fact, spend more money on the Super Bowl – making a pilgrimage to the game; attending parties bedecked with official Super Bowl paraphernalia; placing bets and entering office pools—than Americans spend on traditional religious practices and institutions throughout the entire month."¹¹⁷

This demonstrates what sport is doing and how it is being used today. When sport has become the most important activity in one's life, it fills the role of religion. One responds to their surroundings with a mindset tuned to in celebrate sport and it dominates everything they do. Marcus Aurelius once said, "Therein lies perfection, to live out each day as one's last."¹¹⁸ When that is the reason someone plays sport and builds a life around it, they have a desire which is close to being good, but the focus is wrong. When a sport's victory prompts a religious response, the win will feel like the best thing in life. But when the dust settles, the victory does not provide lasting satisfaction and more victories and accomplishments are desired. Sport has taken the role of the church in American society. What will become of its future because of this prominent role? Will the church and sport meet at a crossroads down the line or will sport continue trending this direction to overtake even more of a role in the life of American society?

3.3 How Churches Have Used Sport Wrong.

With sport seeming to run away from the church, churches have tried to maintain relevance by staying connected with sport and regain some control. Religious scholar, Lonnie Kliever, explains, "Sports are inherently evangelical; they compete for our religious sensibilities. They can open the door either to genius or madness, which is why the church has tried throughout history to control them."¹¹⁹ The potential to make use of sport is there, but if not used carefully, sport can take over as seen in our society. Churches and organizations flaunt sports to make their program more attractive. Yet, "Sports, as experienced in modern culture and all too

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 51 and 58.

¹¹⁷ James Mathisen, "American Sport as Folk Religion" in *From Season to Season: Sports as American Religion*, ed. Joseph Price (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 2001), 215.

¹¹⁸ George Sheehan, "Playing," in *Sport and Religion*, ed. Shirl Hoffman (Champaign, Ill: Human Kinetics Books, 1992), 86.

¹¹⁹ Hoffman, *Good Game*, 273.

often embraced by the church, is void of spiritual nutrition.”¹²⁰ Churches tend to have sport be a part of their program because everyone else has sports activities, but often times they don’t do anything spiritually connected with sport beyond getting people inside the door to play. Hoffman wrote, “Unless Christians in the athletic and academic communities develop a healthy curiosity about the relationship of sports to faith, they are likely to continue bouncing between two different worlds framed by two different worldviews.”¹²¹ He is concerned about the internal fight people have without clear direction. The church trains and educates its people, and they are strengthened by the Holy Spirit. When they are sent out into the world to fight those secular liturgies, they are prepared. They are trusted to make the right, godly decisions. They know what an idol looks like, but it does not always look like the Golden Calf the Israelites worshiped in the desert. Sport slowly has integrated itself into our beings and demands more. Replicating what passes for sport in the broader culture has not enabled the church to do what sport is doing emotionally and spiritually.

What is the church trying to do with sport? There does not seem to be much of a plan beyond sharing the message of Christ. Yes, good still comes from preaching, but can sport be used better and more effectively? “The problem for the Christian community, then, is that having launched a rudderless boat into the roiling waters of popular sport, they are adrift, possessing neither a clear sense of what they want out of their sport experiences nor a coherent philosophy to guide them in achieving it.”¹²² Without a sense of purpose and a clear understanding of what sport has done and can do, churches can get themselves into trouble. The American church has mixed so many doctrines of multiple religions without realizing it. “God’s winning team was supposed to reach the world. Instead, the world is reaching us.”¹²³ If churches try to take what looks successful in popular sports culture, they need to be careful not to give up ground on the Bible.

There is a need for the church to address what its purpose for sport is. Jim Putman, founder of Real Life Ministries, sums up the American scene this way, “As we look at what is being produced in America’s churches, I see nothing like what was intended by our Lord.

¹²⁰ Hoffman, “Toward Narrowing the Gulf,” 303.

¹²¹ Hoffman, *Good Game*, 13.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 20-21.

¹²³ Jim Putman, *Church is a Team Sport* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2009), 72.

American Christians are not on a mission. They look far more like the world than they should. They live the same way and chase the same things.”¹²⁴ If churches and schools want to participate in sport, should they look different than sport played in any other place? They should be asking why we have this sports program, what are we looking to accomplish, and is it just to have a sports program or to put Christ forward? How does it reflect on the church and God when “A number of people have told me that church league sports or Christian college athletics have been scenes of some of the worst displays of sportsmanship they have witnessed.”¹²⁵ The value of sport in those situations is not very high for the church and may only serve as a draw for society to come to that establishment. But if an individual does come, the message should be clear that this place is different, these players, fans, and coaches understand something more. The church in America in many places has gotten stuck serving sport and, as a result, is spinning its wheels. “Religion is like the tar baby—it’s gotten stuck and the more it struggles, the more tar it gets on it. There’s the danger when anything moral plays with anything as public, as notorious, as celebrated as sport—you get stuck.”¹²⁶ The church seems to have found comfort in the status quo it has with sports. When the church’s purpose is just to have the sports program, sports provide its own purpose for the individual to achieve glory and promote individuals.

The church needs to revert back to having sport serve God, for it to be a handmaiden of the Gospel message. The question then comes, how does the church accomplish that? What has been occurring in American churches is the attempt to harmonize sport and religion together. Some have tried to change sport. However, if anything dramatic is done there is general pushback, for sport is so celebrated in society. If the church attacks sport, culture will respond in kind and defend its beloved sport. The church should start within its walls and create a culture of understanding about sports first. There needs to be education on the dangers, the pitfalls, and what Christian sport should look like. Then the attempt can be made to integrate that understanding in how sport is used in the church’s culture. What the church continues to do wrong is seeing an aspect of sport they like, taking it, putting it into practice, and hoping it will work out. Going forward, the church needs to take a look at what works and what does not and bring back sport to serving the Lord.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 74.

¹²⁵ Hoffman, “Toward Narrowing the Gulf,” 310.

¹²⁶ Hoffman, *Good game*, 16.

4. How Churches Can Refocus the Love Affair Back to the Love of Christ.

The church has the truth people are searching for, the answer to human dissatisfaction. Sport has turned into a way to forget one's sin, an earthly pursuit that feels spiritual without the guilt. We always fail at some point in that earthly pursuit, just like we fail to try to find truth. But Christ has won the victory and given us the truth in him through the Holy Spirit. He gives us fulfillment. Christ sends us out with the mission to share this good news and he allows us to have the freedom to decide the best method to deliver it. Mueller sees sport as a gift from God, but it is often misused. He believes churches can use sports terms and analogies to connect with Americans with something they know and understand.¹²⁷ Bergmann has a similar view, "Sports bring people together and teach valuable life lessons. The church should tap into this ability of sports to bring out these characteristics...At the same time, we should not let sports become the focus. We don't want to overshadow the real goal in life."¹²⁸ The focus is and should always be Christ. If this changes, then the church needs to take a step back and reassess what they are using sport for.

4.1. How Can We Best Evangelize?

There is a fight out there for our souls. We cannot see it, but it certainly is there. The devil is working tirelessly to win back the souls he has lost. The Word of God gives believers the strength to fight back against temptation by the Holy Spirit working faith in their heart. James Smith has an interesting way of describing this struggle. He feels that in the church's educational training, they are set on "putting the right ideas and doctrines and beliefs in their heads. But that is not what the culture was trying to do. The culture was trying to get ahold of their gut, their longings, their love, their heart."¹²⁹ The American culture has this great power to shape what a person should love by appealing to the senses and using the whole body. Let us take this knowledge of loving God with our whole body into evangelism and reconnect worship to the world we live in.

¹²⁷ Mueller, interview.

¹²⁸ Bergmann, interview.

¹²⁹ Baker Publishing Group. "What is the Cultural Liturgies Project - James K. A. Smith - Imagining the Kingdom," *YouTube video*, March 11, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iyVs0kW7QWU>

Jesus had a teaching style that incorporated his audiences into his teaching. He used what they could relate to and modeled the very behavior he wanted to see. “When dealing with our children, we often hear that character is caught, not taught. Jesus modeled everything from how to deal with enemies, to how to deal with sinners. He modeled how to love, serve, and fight. He modeled humility, love, and righteous anger.”¹³⁰ Dwight Sandvold, a fitness and sports trainer, referred to Jesus’ style as having the ability to use places and situations for teachable moments. He was able to teach a whole lot in a short amount of time by walking and teaching, but he did not go too quickly to lose you. He slowed down to have you see the trees through the forest.¹³¹ Jesus used stories because that is how we think and associate truths in our mind.

The church can and should use stories in our training and evangelism today. They can be used at sports camps to relate play to Scriptural truths. Biblical stories can be acted out and used to bring the Gospel into their lives. Too often we stop and short change children with a devotion loosely tying in, and then we send them back to play. “Our hearts traffic in stories. Not only are we lovers; we are storytellers—and story-listeners... We are narrative animals whose very orientation to the world is fundamentally shaped by stories. Stories are like the air we breathe. Narrative is the scaffolding of our experience.”¹³² A well-told story has the ability to leave an impression. Instead of the children leaving camp focused solely on the sports they played, they could be leaving with the need for a Savior in their hearts. Pastor Sievert writes, “21st century America is shaped by visual stories and that means this is a time of opportunity for the Lutheran preacher. People are ripe to hear, to experience and to discover THE story and to come to the knowledge of the truth.”¹³³ Pastors and lay members are not out there to make something up or formulate a story that will captivate their minds. The Bible already gives us the story, the truth of Christ. President Mark Schroeder said, “Polls indicate that more Americans than ever before identify themselves as church-goers while, simultaneously, the rate of biblical illiteracy has never been higher. In the mainline Christian churches, the situation is almost dismal.”¹³⁴ Our churches have the opportunity to tell the story and sports can help. “Kids do not relate to parables

¹³⁰ Putman, 134.

¹³¹ Dwight Sandvold, “Fitness and Wellness for the Called Worker” (lecture, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, WI, October 26, 2015).

¹³² Smith, 108.

¹³³ Phillip Sievert, “A Paradigm for 21st Century Lutheran Preachers,” Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, [http://wlsce.net/sites/default/files/related_files/A%20Paradigm%20for%2021st%20Century%20Lutheran%20Preachers%20\(Sievert\).pdf](http://wlsce.net/sites/default/files/related_files/A%20Paradigm%20for%2021st%20Century%20Lutheran%20Preachers%20(Sievert).pdf) (accessed December 1, 2015), 16.

¹³⁴ Sievert, 19.

unless it is explained, they don't understand the context. Sports can fit that role.”¹³⁵ The American culture was raised on stories. “Our surrogate parents were the TV and the VCR, and we can spew out entertainment trivia.”¹³⁶ Stories are the only thing that makes sense, so we turn our life into a story and look for redemption, the happy ending. The story of Christ is the only one with true redemption. It needs a storyteller, and the church alone possesses the story.¹³⁷ “The rationale for sports evangelism is simple: every ethnic and socioeconomic barrier can be broken with a soccer ball, a basketball or the athletic tool of choice where you are ministering.”¹³⁸ The church just needs to remember that believers are players in the world, but not of the world.¹³⁹

How do you do this ministry?

This ministry varies from place to place. Each community is different and allows different methods and strategies. Some places a sports camp just would not be the best fit. Instead, WELS churches have determined to make use of a band camp, drama camp, or even an art or science camp. What will work best for the area depends on asking some questions to understand the community's culture effectively. Matthew White, a student at Adbury Seminary, wrote his dissertation on the sports ministry of the biggest churches in America and came to recommend nine questions which revolve around the idea of searching for what drives the people in your community. His main focus is on “What does the community spend time and money on? What is most on the hearts of the people? ... What are people thinking about, dreaming about, and longing for?”¹⁴⁰ If these questions lead to thinking a sports camp would be a good idea, then you have to decide on what you are trying to accomplish. Find the need you are looking to address and have everything revolve around achieving that goal. The focus is kept on Christ to guide the way. When he is no longer the center of what you are doing, it is like unplugging your phone from the charger. You can have success for a while, you might be able to get pretty far, but eventually the phone dies. Have every activity be done with a purpose of staying connected to Christ.

¹³⁵ Mueller, interview.

¹³⁶ Sievert, 21.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Matthew White, “Sports Ministry in America's One Hundred Largest Churches” (doctorate dissertation, Asbury Theological Seminary, 2006), 36.

¹³⁹ Hoffman, *Good Game*, 276.

¹⁴⁰ White, 38.

The church's purpose is to unite as a team and glorify God. One example Putman uses is that the church is the Lord's team with the opponent being the devil. The field played on is the earth, all the people are its players, and the pastors and leaders help coach God's team. "In Scripture, I see team everywhere. Teams have a common purpose; they run the same play at the same time and work together...I also believe that most Americans understand sports far better than they do the church. So I've used language that is familiar ...to explain what I see going on in the church."¹⁴¹ For example, "Christ bought our contract for the highest possible price and made us a part of His team." As part of God's team, the church should want to use sport as another aspect of ministry and do it with excellence. We want to honor God with how we live, and how we share his gospel message. A sloppily put together soccer camp with a little bit of God's Word thrown in does not reflect well back on Christ. A camp that is organized and well thought out is able to bring God's Word to children and parents while glorifying God. We want them leaving our sports and camps thinking that what they saw was something different than what they see elsewhere in this world. They play and operate in a distinctive way. This distinction is Christ, and he motivates everything done at the camp.

This starts with the leaders of the camp. They make the biggest difference to reaching the need the church sees. They are the ones evangelizing the truth, even if they are only a seventh grader helping out with the little children. How the leaders carry themselves makes a huge difference in the eyes of the children and parents. Putman believes a leader should be committed, authentic, refreshingly honest, strong in convictions, focused, and at the core he cares that no one should be lost. "You cannot... remain nonchalant about the people God has put in your care."¹⁴² There is a deep care in these words, these characteristics that Putman outlines. God deserves our best and nothing less. It is so easy to look at sports programs, camps, or even the church and point out problems. As Christians, we have the motivation to step in. We have the strength and the resources to praise our God and share his Word. Sports are able to connect to our culture in ways that nothing else can.

Something in our play needs to change. Our sports culture always wants a winner and a loser. This results in someone being brought down while another feels the temporary high of

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 15.

¹⁴² Ibid., 14.

victory. This does not always have to be the case, though. “We do not always have to be achievers in life. We can also be a celebrator of what is given.”¹⁴³ Mueller suggests that instead of promoting a rivalry between our Lutheran grade schools, join them together in unity through Christ and show them this is just a game.¹⁴⁴ Would sports be ruined if two teams came together, mixed up their teams and played? Regardless, in our sports camps we have the opportunity to see past the competitive nature of sport and simply play. It is valuable to teach how to properly win and lose because they will have to experience both throughout their life. Churches can teach basic skills alongside Christian values and beliefs.

A Christian atmosphere around the church and the sports it uses to serve God is able to demonstrate what the church is looking to accomplish. Often times we forget “we got this new believer into a war they are not equipped to fight. They don’t know the rules, or the weapons available, or even how to use them.”¹⁴⁵ God wants the church to have a climate of shepherding, an environment of everyone working to win the lost. Acts 2 shows the early Christian Church working together with a purpose to live the gospel and share it with others. Putman believes, “If we teach biblical truths and principles, and use Jesus’s discipleship methods, it will produce people who stand out in the world rather than go along with it.”¹⁴⁶ At Putman’s church, he has set up a funnel chart to educate, train, and integrate his members with four levels of classes. Our churches do not need to take it to this level, but his methodology does leave us something valuable to take away. His system creates a relationship between members and has them grow together. They walk out with a common mission and are educated to do it well. He understands and reminds other churches to “remember, you can only do so much. Your church only has so much energy and resources, so you must be careful to choose your attack carefully. It is better to do a few things well than to do a lot poorly.” A helpful, but difficult thing to put into practice is to have your members be invested in a sports camp and be able to let go of the perfect plan in your head. This allows a group of people in your church to take ownership and be prideful of how they are glorifying God.

¹⁴³ Thomas Ryan, “Towards a Spirituality for Sports,” in *Sport*, ed. John Coleman (Edinburgh, Scotland: T & T Clark, 1989), 112.

¹⁴⁴ Mueller, interview.

¹⁴⁵ Putman, 97.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 140.

Sharing the work of a sports ministry is a challenging endeavor, and it is more successful when your members have been trained for this leadership. Matthew White, a student at Asbury Seminary, looked at the largest 100 churches with sports ministry, and 27 of those churches have over 1000 people participate in sports ministry each week.¹⁴⁷ For a church to be able to manage this, they need to have the training. He reports 51 of the 100 churches have training programs for leadership and development.¹⁴⁸ Delegating the work of ministry and evangelism does not always end up as the image you foresaw in your mind, but these people will be more invested and grow with you in understanding. If something did not work, you can always add in something different later.

White's research also emphasizes how big churches maintain their sports ministry. They keep "up to date records of participants, how members came into the church to know what is valuable to them."¹⁴⁹ Records allow the church to do many different important tasks. You are able to keep a reminder of the relationship your church has made, you can have a waiver signed to keep your church protected, and you can develop an email list to inform of upcoming sports events. With sports camp, an important task is to reach out to past participants early in the Spring before Summer plans are made. White finds the qualities of these churches show them intentionally sharing, inviting, and following up as being imperative to their ministry. They must be flexible, starting small, but leave room for expansion, and dream big without settling.¹⁵⁰ One of the methods they find success with is offering 78 different sports. "This amazing diversity demonstrates the importance of connecting with people according to their areas of interest."¹⁵¹ While 70 percent of these churches use basketball the most, your church does not need to be tied down the common sports. Some of these churches offer classes or perform a service like one "having a cycling ministry that served local children and youth by repairing bicycles before scheduled rides. This integration of servant ministry and sports ministry has proven to be a positive ministry."¹⁵² Overall, White's study demonstrates the importance of connecting to the community on their level and continually following up to maintain the relationship. His study asked how many were integrated into the church, but not how they integrated God's Word into

¹⁴⁷ White, 85.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 89.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 92.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 104.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 94.

¹⁵² Ibid., 98.

the sports or in what ways they followed up. It is not hard to put on interesting and valuable sports events, but to have the event be of value to the church in a way to further the gospel is more challenging.

Many churches try to have a big sports camp in the summer, and that can serve them well. That is often where the church becomes satisfied. They are content with putting on a well-attended camp and don't realize there is still more work to do integrating the families into other activities or inviting them to church. Mueller had the thought of spreading out these sports events throughout the year, not as huge gatherings, but to maintain the relationship and have visitors be more comfortable with the church. "If sport is happening already, why not bring God's Word into that. Why do sports have to be just secular? Let's try to dedicate camps to be more than just church members."¹⁵³ The church is able to bring people in the community together and make a relationship. "Where modern society wants to move us towards machines, sports bring us back to people... Where modern technology makes it easier for us to be passive, play summons us to be active. Sports gather us together in solidarity, counterbalancing some of the individualistic, self-serving tendencies fostered by contemporary society."¹⁵⁴ Sport may be the reason some people come at first to find peace during a busy week, but the goal of the church is to have them leave with a lasting peace in Christ. The church can promote an atmosphere where the players are good stewards of their gifts. Bergmann and many others believe, "Sports teach hard work, determination, discipline, teamwork, and numerous other characteristics. I think these characteristics complement Christian aspects of a person's life."¹⁵⁵ There is not a silver bullet for operating a sports ministry, but this ministry does provide an opportunity to show the Christian life, demonstrate the love of Christ, and make relationships.

4.2. A View From the Top: The Faith of Professional Athletes.

Often times it is easy for even the most faithful of believers to get caught up in sport. It can be playing in a close game with the pressure on or experiencing the tension of your favorite team in the championship. How does this account make you feel? In 1969, Real Madrid is playing Sabadell in the Spanish Championship with 80,000 fans present and shouting cheers.

¹⁵³ Mueller, interview.

¹⁵⁴ Thomas Ryan, "Towards a Spirituality for Sports," in *Sport*, ed. John Coleman (Edinburgh, Scotland: T & T Clark, 1989), 113.

¹⁵⁵ Bergmann, interview.

With the score tied, Sabadell's Pedro Zaballa received a pass by the goal, and Madrid's defender and goalie collide, both unconscious. Zaballa had an open goal. "Yet in that instant, when the roar of the crowd, the egocentric pull of the game, and the expectations of his teammates and supporters all conspired to urge him to blast the ball into the net, Zaballa did the unexpected. Without hesitating, he kicked the ball away from the net and over the touchline, opting not to score what might well have been the winning goal."¹⁵⁶ You don't see an action like this very often, but when you do, you remember. Sabadell ended up losing that game 1-0, but Zaballa showed something much greater than victory or a championship. Moments like this make you stop and think about what is really important. Every once and a while, you hear about an opponent helping carry their injured rival across the finish line or around the bases. "What is truly highest and finest about God's people is not their capacity to sacrifice and work hard in order to bask in the rewards of long-coveted goals but their capacity, when the right moment comes, to give up those rewards willingly in order to do the right thing."¹⁵⁷ This section of the paper takes a look at firsthand accounts of athletes who are at the top of their sport and applies what they have learned so that the church may make use of this knowledge.

Pursuing the World: When You Serve Sports

In the articles written by the FCA and AIA, many of the athletes they associate with have a similar story. The struggle to be successful and make it to the professional level became everything. When they live and breathe their sport, they begin to serve it. Gerald McCoy, one of the defensive tackles for the Tampa Bay Buccaneers says, "Football became who I was instead of something I did."¹⁵⁸ In the struggle to become better and achieve more, one can easily put sport in a higher role. Ben Crane, a golfer on the PGA tour, recalls what it was like trying to win. "It wasn't long before golf became my god.... I knew that God should be more of a factor in my life, but I was busy trying to be a great college golfer and pursuing other things."¹⁵⁹ The glory given to athletes can be overwhelming in a society that treats them as gods. Tim Howard, United States goalkeeper says, "I came to a crossroads.' As he tasted success on the field, he realized he

¹⁵⁶ Hoffman, *Good game*, 217.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 218.

¹⁵⁸ FCA, "Gerald McCoy," *FCA.org*, December 30, 2013, <https://www.fca.org/magazine/2013/12/30/gerald-mccoy> (accessed December 1, 2015).

¹⁵⁹ Ben Crane, "Ben Crane," Ben Crane, www.bencranegolf.com (accessed December 1, 2015).

had two choices: strive to be a sports idol, or give God the glory.”¹⁶⁰ Many athletes decide to strive to be an idol to enjoy the fame and fortune that goes along with it. Kobe Bryant recently retired from the NBA and wrote a love letter to basketball. He wrote, “I fell in love with you... You asked for my hustle, I gave you my heart... I played through the sweat and hurt not because challenge called me, but because YOU called me. I did everything for YOU because that’s what you do when someone makes you feel as alive as you’ve made me feel.”¹⁶¹ Man cannot look into the heart, but Kobe’s confession certainly leads to the assumption that basketball is his everything, his love, and his idol in this world. The temptation is there for anyone to fall in love with sport; the struggle is not to. While sport is an idol for many, Justin Forsett, running back for the Baltimore Ravens experienced idols in a different way. “I was at the bottom of the depth chart, and then spent time on injured reserve. I just felt so undervalued and underappreciated. Because of that, I had a lot of idols in my heart and a lot of things I needed His help with, both spiritually and mentally.”¹⁶² These firsthand witnesses from the highest level of sport show the dangers one can fall into. In their Christian testimonies with the FCA and AIA, most of these athletes recalled hard times or wrong paths until a friend or chaplain pointed them to Christ and they made “the decision” to accept Christ in their heart. Their life and outlook changed going forward. While these groups do not support our WELS Lutheran beliefs, they still show athletes living their faith on the field or court and are a witness to those watching.

How does this translate to the church? When you go visit the local playground or YMCA and see a game played, you see individuals playing for themselves. Their attitude fluctuates depending on their successes and failures which demonstrate their mindset. Some players are much more serious than others, but you can see a difference in how a player reacts to a hard foul, a blowout loss, or a last second victory by how they carry themselves. Real people in your communities are struggling with having a sport consume their whole life. Their self-esteem and worth thrive on the small time fame and glory they achieve through winning. On the other side, some can feel undervalued and underappreciated. When a person serves sports, they give it

¹⁶⁰ Chris Lawrence, “Tim Howard: The Goal Keeper,” *CRU.org*, May 1, 2006, <http://www.cru.org/communities/athletes/tim-howard-the-keeper.html> (accessed December 1, 2015).

¹⁶¹ Kobe Bryant, “Dear Basketball,” *Theplayerstribune.com*, November 29, 2015. <http://www.theplayerstribune.com/dear-basketball/> (accessed December 1, 2015).

¹⁶² Dave Pond, “RUN WITH IT: Justin Forsett is making the most of his opportunity with the Baltimore Ravens,” *FCA.org*, Sept 1, 2015, <https://www.fca.org/magazine/2015/09/01/run-with-it> (accessed December 1, 2015).

everything they have for a moment, a brief glimpse of satisfaction. We have something more to offer and it begins by flipping sports on its head and having sports serve you.

Live the Faith: When Sports Serve You

The value of sports to our God comes when Christ comes into focus. All those confessions of struggles are in the people around you and sports provide an opportunity to make a relationship with them. Leadership coach, Steve Connor, talks in his book about home-field advantage being fun and easy, but what is harder is playing away. “Daunting to walk through and have all these fans against you, strange people, strange smells, and a strange atmosphere all lend themselves to distraction and intimidation.”¹⁶³ It is tough for us to go and put ourselves out there, for it is uncomfortable. Imagine what it feels like for a nonmember to come to your open gym, your sports event, or your worship service. With the current system in place, how daunting is it for visitors? The following paragraphs begin the discussion in regard to how a church can defy culture and create an ideal scenario for sharing Christ. To be able to have sports serve you and your church, you need to work on the following.

The Need For Christly Support

When athletes display their Christian faith, they look different and this invites a microscope into their lives. In the face of persecution and negativity by the outside world, they are encouraged by christly support. Chris Maragos, an NFL champion safety from the Seattle Seahawks who now plays for the Philadelphia Eagles says, “Christ is the alpha and omega, the beginning and end of everything. In our lives, to understand where we have reached. Quote, unquote in the world’s view the pinnacle and you really see how empty that is and having Jesus in my life, you really see how important that is, he is everything”¹⁶⁴ Ben Crane shares a similar mindset, “We all fall short of his perfection,” and while Crane plays, Christ is “is the invisible club in the bag.”¹⁶⁵ In the tough, trying times, athletes can always rely on Christ, for they know it is just a game. They still work hard to do their best and glorify God, but whether success comes or not, they still remember why they are here on this earth, to praise and thank their Lord. Jordan

¹⁶³ Steve Connor, *Sports Outreach* (Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2003), 16.

¹⁶⁴ The Resurgence. “Pastor Mark Driscoll Interviews the Seattle Seahawks - Jesus is better than the Super Bowl” YouTube video, January 18, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s8U_ewtHZdw

¹⁶⁵ Rachel Wood and James Masters, “Amen Corner: God’s Golfers,” *CNN*, June 3, 2013, <http://www.cnn.com/2013/06/03/sport/golf/golf-us-open-webb-simpson-god/> (accessed December 1, 2015).

Bergmann had his priorities set this way playing football at the University of Wisconsin. “Sports fit in third after God and family. God comes first. Having that mindset, everything else fits into place.”¹⁶⁶ With Christ as the focus, an athlete’s priorities change from being all about the individual to serving the Lord through their sport. This belief is shown in how a player interacts with one another. Yes, they could rightly be angry with another player after a foul, but you have to think carefully about what it will accomplish. Confidence in Christ is shown when a player embodies a Christian attitude on the playing field and it stands out because this is not the norm.

Here to Serve

Athletes are able to use the role they have been given to serve others. Is that role exclusive to professional athletes? No! It comes easier with individual wealth and recognition, but we are able to serve everywhere and in every situation. Anquon Boldin, wide receiver for the San Francisco 49ers, recently won the Walther Payton Man of the Year award for his acts of service. Boldin understands he can use his success to help out his hometown in Florida. He reminds all people that “We don’t have to grow up in Pahokee to find ourselves in a place of spiritual desolation and desperation...we’re surrounded by sin and sorrow, and it’s too easy to fall into the trap of looking for satisfaction in all the wrong places. We need a Savior to rescue us from our constant pursuit of the poisons of this world that lead to nowhere.”¹⁶⁷ Football enabled Boldin to be able to serve in a way he would never have imagined. Athletes have this ready-made platform and Justin Forsett uses this to share his faith, but not be intrusive with it. Because of his professed faith he says, “I’m aware eyes are constantly on me... As a man of faith, I relish this because it gives me the ability to do what I feel I’m called to do: serve people.”¹⁶⁸ Forsett realizes that he will not be remembered for his career statistics, nor does he want to be. He worries about how he is remembered and asks himself, “What kind of man was I? Who did I serve? What kind of impact did I have in the lives of the people around me?”¹⁶⁹ His

¹⁶⁶ Bergmann, interview.

¹⁶⁷ John Strubel, “‘Tis Better to Give...” *FCA.org*, August 27, 2014. <https://www.fca.org/magazine/2014/08/27/tis-better-to-give> (accessed December 1, 2015).

¹⁶⁸ Justin Forsett, “Influence: A power possessed by, not limited to NFL players” *Sportingnews.com*, June 27, 2014, <http://www.sportingnews.com/nfl-news/4593374-justin-forsett-sporting-news-ravens-running-back-influence-nfl-players-shield-purpose-religion-impact-platform> (accessed December 1, 2015).

¹⁶⁹ Forsett, “Influence.”

greatest fear, when his career is done and gone, is to look back and recognize he didn't use the most of the platform God has given him.¹⁷⁰

Now go back and apply Forsett's thoughts to your own life. How have you done? What can you do better? Boldin saw a need and addressed it. What needs are in your community? The obvious one is the need for Christ, but is there anything else in your research that your Church can grab onto and run with? This may or may not include a sports ministry, but one way to get to know your community is playing with them and forming a bond on multiple levels to show you care and this is not a faith with a cheap God, but a faith with a loving God that provides every need.

In the professional leagues, athletes become the best by developing their whole game. In the same way, we should work to develop ourselves too for doing God's work. We want to be proficient at proclaiming the faith, but also do well to demonstrate our faith. For imagine a call-up to play in the Olympics. It is an honor. In the same way, God has called you up to honor him with your daily life! In every situation, confessing the faith verbally might not always be your first move, but you can show your faith through your actions. The AIA told 278 lb. Bengal offensive tackle Anthony Munoz to be a living sacrifice for God playing intensely to loudly say thank you to God.¹⁷¹ In this movement for athletes to share their faith, "many famous professional athletes grant postgame interviews to reporters only on the condition that they first be permitted to publicly affirm their religious views, a practice that has prompted reporters to click off their tape recorders until the 'God-talk' has finished."¹⁷² The reporters for society do not want to hear the Christian faith professed, an athlete's faith is shown to many more when they are on the field. Jordan Bergmann gives us insight into his thoughts on the field, "You don't have to kneel down and pray after a play to show your faith. You do it with sportsmanship, hard work, and the way you approach each play. When God is such a large part of your life, he is never far from your mind during a game."¹⁷³ He continues on with the idea that God may not be on an athlete's mind every play, but you certainly want to have the mindset of glorifying God. Sport is valuable to Christians as a field God has given to demonstrate Christ in how an athlete plays,

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Robert Higgs, "Confusion about Christ in Sports and Religion," in *Sport and Religion*, ed. Shirl Hoffman (Champaign, Ill: Human Kinetics Bks, 1992), 118.

¹⁷² Ibid., 130.

¹⁷³ Bergmann, interview.

finishes, and reacts to both positives and negatives. We are here to serve our Lord on this earth and we can use sport with our attitude and actions to share Christ. Sports break down the barrier to communicate with people from every walk of life and we can use that opportunity to make relationships. How we carry ourselves will demonstrate we serve a different purpose than ourselves and when the proper moment arises, we can share the hope that we have.

Lived Faith Creates Atmosphere

Living faith out like this creates an atmosphere of excitement for God’s word surrounding the players and the game. This atmosphere is capable of doing amazing things when it is brought to its full potential. Mason wisely brings us an insight about Christ’s ministry, “Jesus didn’t just bring news from heaven; he brought heaven itself down to the lives of men and women...Once you are living the gospel, then it becomes such a short step to inspire others with its message.”¹⁷⁴ Anquon Boldin saw this first hand when he had the opportunity to play on a very religious Baltimore Ravens team. “I’ve seen when you have a locker room like we had in Baltimore and guys become bold and encouraging in their faith—they read more, they pray more, they ask more questions.”¹⁷⁵ A witness like this is immensely beneficial to the faith of the believers in that atmosphere, but also is a great evangelism to those without faith. Ben Crane and many other Christians on the PGA tour have created an atmosphere on tour and on the internet. They call it the player’s devotional and have a Scripture passage with some thoughts and a reflection on it. They all take turns contributing devotions to it and discuss them in the morning before a tournament round.¹⁷⁶ Crane says, “It’s a way of us getting our hearts warmed up before we play...to remind ourselves why we are doing this.”¹⁷⁷ These individuals have set up a system for Christian growth and support. There are many ways to do this. Many athletes like Crane and Forsett use Twitter to discuss religion and give daily Bible passages for encouragement. A Christian atmosphere develops to encourage questions, have a person share struggles during a break, and have the chance to discuss Christ. The goal is to provide the mentoring relationship.

Jesus had personal intimate relationships with the people he ministered to. He was able to see into their hearts and know what they needed. We are not able to see into hearts, but we are

¹⁷⁴ Mason, 220.

¹⁷⁵ Strubel, “‘Tis Better to Give.”

¹⁷⁶ The players devotional can be found here: <http://www.playersdevotional.com/>

¹⁷⁷ Rachel Wood and James Masters, “Amen Corner: God’s Golfers.”

able to minister through authenticity. When someone is filled with the Spirit and truly excited about Christ, it shows and can be infective to those around the person. Andy Dalton, the quarterback for the Cincinnati Bengals, was described this way when he attended TCU. “Dalton’s genuine faith was magnetic to those around him. He was a front-row attendee at Friday night chapels and church on Sundays, drawing others with him. Because of him, Franks said, 90 percent of the 2010 football team came to chapels.”¹⁷⁸ Athletes living out their faith make an impact and our churches can create this same atmosphere. Bergmann remembers the atmosphere at the University of Wisconsin fondly. “There were so many strong Christian leaders on the team. Kevin Zietler was always the calm, steady leader. Not necessarily vocal in his faith, but showing it through his actions. Jared Abbrederis was more vocal...talking to anyone about his faith...I may not have been as vocal, but I hope I was able to lead by example.”¹⁷⁹ His words remind us that we are not all the same person. God has given his people in the Church varying gifts to glorify his name. We are all on a marathon. For new believers, that is a challenge and we cannot get in the habit of cheering them on as if it is a sprint and leave them on their own. We want to run along with them, encourage them, and offer support. There are many different roles one can fill in a church’s sports ministry. Therefore, not every sports ministry or evangelism will look the same because of the personnel at your church and the needs of your community. The atmosphere the church can create by living out the Christian faith is valuable in every situation, not just ones involving sports. The objective is to provide opportunities for people to hear the gospel and see it acted out authentically. The church wants to provide a setting for spiritual growth and development.

A Church Filled With Men of Integrity

No one likes a hypocrite, especially in the church because it drives members away. People want to see if your authenticity is an act or not. If you do not practice what you preach, why should others take the time to listen. Connor declares, “If we do not practice good sportsmanship – the character and qualities of Christ manifested in us – in and around the participation of sport, the throat of our gospel message is slashed!”¹⁸⁰ Backing up your words

¹⁷⁸ Joshua Cooley, “Bengal Believer,” *FCA.org*, August 29, 2013, <https://www.fca.org/magazine/2013/08/29/bengal-believer> (accessed December 1, 2015).

¹⁷⁹ Bergmann, interview.

¹⁸⁰ Connor, 93.

and beliefs in Christ is vitally important to show what a man of integrity looks like, to show what the love of Christ looks like. Boldin says, “When guys see that you’re firm in what you believe and how you live, they start to respect who you are as a person. That kind of integrity can only come from a personal discipline and commitment to Scripture.”¹⁸¹ Being in the Word of God helps anyone stay anchored in Christ, but connecting to Scripture is especially important to athletes to keep focus and face everything around them. This does not always result in positives, though. Tim Howard remembers some tough times in his career and says, “There’s a lot of negativity in terms of criticism and people who say not-so-nice things, and to be able to deal and cope with that has been a challenge, but it’s because of my faith that I have been able to stay grounded.”¹⁸²

There is also a danger of a sports ministry becoming self-indulgent. Challenges come with popularity, wins, and all the aspects of success. It is crucial to remain focused and be reminded why your church has the sports ministry. The lifeblood of what the church does is found in Christ and going back to him in his word early and often helps keep perspective. Faith also keeps athletes grounded in success and all the other aspects of life professional sports bring. Forsett says, “NFL stardom comes with a laundry list of potential distractions... With everything going on in the world, the opportunities to have Bible study [and pregame chapel] are huge. As a professional athlete and a Christian, there are a lot of things that can get thrown at you, so you have to stay sharp and always be ready.”¹⁸³ The lesson churches can learn from these men is practice what you preach. Do not have devotions on Christly behavior or love and then go out to the court and coach the children to play contradicting the message just taught. Playing sports gives the opportunity to teach how a Christian should live their life, and that is much more important than winning or losing.

God cares about this world we live in, the people he put in it, and what the people do. He does not cheer on certain teams but works out everything for our good. Sport for professional athletes is their career, but for many of us, sport is just a hobby or a valuable curricular activity.

¹⁸¹ Strubel, “‘Tis Better to Give.”

¹⁸² John Strubel, “Comfortable in His Own Skin,” *FCA.org*, June 25, 2014. <https://www.fca.org/magazine/2014/06/25/comfortable-in-his-own-skin> (accessed December 1, 2015).

¹⁸³ Dave Pond, “Run With It.”

In either case, God cares and watches over his people. He wants us to glorify him in all things, so let us use sport well to spread his name to a culture that is in love with the game of sport.

4.3. A Lesson Learned from WELS Sports and Camps.

The greatest lessons learned come from experiencing situations firsthand. Watching children excited about God's Word drives me to bring more to them in any way I can. You are able to see what works and what does not work when you are involved with a sports camp. It is important to look back on what you want to build on and improve on for the next event. The biggest takeaway from the camps I have been a part of and the camps Tim Mueller has run is that God works, but not always on our timetable. Mueller shared an experience that just recently came to fruition. A boy came to his camp in first grade with no biblical knowledge. His parents were divorced and no solid connection was made to the family. The second year he comes back and the staff got to know the mother a little bit more, but again no firm follow-up. They happen to be lost in the shuffle at a big church. The third and the fourth year they come back again and the mom starts asking about baptism. But it became talk and there wasn't follow-up because they were not coming to church. This past summer, the fifth year, they come back and the mother broke down about needing to be more in the Word and getting her son baptized, but once again for whatever reason, it did not work out. Then walking through Walmart a couple weeks ago, there she is with her son and everything clicks.¹⁸⁴ The son was just baptized and they are in Bible studies with the pastor. Mueller told me, "God continues to work. Not always the first year, it can take five to six years to build relationships."¹⁸⁵ This example is a great encouragement for churches starting sports camps because using one does not equal having new members in the door overnight. They do enable the church to get to know the community, make relationships with the people, leave a lasting impression, and provide an opportunity to share Christ.

This section provides insight to what Tim Mueller and I have seen in our experiences with sports camps. Mueller has developed a small curriculum called Path to Victory for basketball and soccer camps, and he goes out across the United States and helps churches run their camp the first year. Then he supplements them with materials for the following years. Tim Mueller is a public school teacher and coach who was asked in 2005 to take his local basketball

¹⁸⁴ Fall 2015.

¹⁸⁵ Mueller, interview.

camp on the road. Since then, he has gone to 15 different churches across our country. While Mueller has much more experience running camps, the experience I have had comes from being a part of different camps. I recently wrote a soccer camp curriculum called Forward in Faith Athletics for a soccer camp I started at my vicar church, St. Paul's in North Mankato, MN.¹⁸⁶ Both Mueller and I are willing to help out churches and provide resources to any and all churches whether it is the 1st year or the 7th year. Mueller is also interested in compiling a sports curriculum and devotions to produce a book or larger resource to aid churches in their endeavor to witness Christ through sports camps. This is what we have learned.

It starts with the church needing to figure out what it is looking to accomplish with the camp. Are you trying to strengthen the biblical knowledge of the children within your own church? Are you trying to connect to the community to show you have something to offer? Are you trying to use the camp to evangelize non-believers? Or are you trying to do all three? Once the church decides this, they can plan on how they will accomplish this goal. Mueller has two goals when he is running a camp. "Share the Gospel. He always starts with John 3:16, showing the need for a Savior, and who he is." He wants the children to, "leave remembering they have a need, a Savior. Not how to dribble, shoot, score, or win because it does not matter if they forget that. It matters if they forget the need for a Savior."¹⁸⁷ His second goal is to build relationships. "People do not care how much you know, but how much you care. Willing to listen is what makes a Christian different... Want them to enter church feeling safe, if they do not feel safe, then they won't enter the church."¹⁸⁸ Out of these flow other strategies and plans to evangelize through your sports camp, but if you lack Christ or trying to make a relationship with the children and families, you should reconsider why you have your sports camp.

One aspect of the camp which stands out is having the children experience the Bible. When you connect children to the Word in an engaging way, you have them leaving with the Word as the emphasis, along with some new skills, friendships, etc. In Mankato, the curriculum had God's Word integrated throughout the day. The theme of the camp was biblical cities. We took the children on a journey from the Garden of Eden to Mt. Sinai, from Bethlehem to

¹⁸⁶ The Church called the camp – the 507 Soccer Camp – using the area code to symbolize that this is a community event.

¹⁸⁷ Mueller, interview.

¹⁸⁸ Mueller, interview.

Capernaum, and finally we ended in Jerusalem. Each team was named after one of these cities and had their own team jersey. This setup allowed me to give them a general overview of the Bible. We started with the first sin and promise, which led to the law and Jesus being born to keep God's promise. Then we showed how Jesus lived. He fulfilled the promise, kept the law, and finally died and rose again to save all people. Each day the leader introduced the city for the day, connect the skill focused on to a biblical theme, center the devotion on the text relating, and finally bring it all together and apply it. The team jerseys in my camp were the biggest evangelism tool for them to tie in what they learned and remember it; while it also was a cool shirt that kids would want to wear. Just in the couple weeks after the camp, I saw kids wearing their shirts at church and Walmart. Without realizing it, the shirts acted as an evangelism tool for them to witness to Christ with the story of their city. The shirts also were meant to be an interest for the children to come back the next year and get another shirt. In this cyclical process, they would go away with more knowledge to do more evangelism. In the future, I would like to incorporate the children more with acting out the story. I saw this done in my summer vicar experience in Eagle River, Alaska. The VBS tied in actions for the children to go along with the devotion. Their favorite action involved blue streamers for the water Peter tried walking on with yellow streamers for lightening and banging pie tins for thunder. The children remember that and are able to connect the actions to the story as a way to make it come alive before their eyes.

Mueller does not like to waste a moment. He ties his teaching in throughout the camp, even during the drills which are a great idea. "He develops character traits as well as physical skills, which are good for kids for life. Integrity, perseverance, dedication, hard work, and trust all go into camp by focusing on doing what is right."¹⁸⁹ He has the leaders remind the kids to have good manners and asks the kids why you act a certain way and demonstrates this to them. It is all to show thanks for what Jesus did for us. When teaching a skill like pivoting in basketball, he has them imagine a nail going through the shoe to keep it planted. Then he adds, but it doesn't go through the foot like my friend. You know who that friend is? Mueller works to connect everything back to Christ through firsthand experience and dialogue with the kids to make sure it makes sense to them. Every day he always asks the children, "What was the most important thing yesterday?" Someone answers, "We learned passing yesterday." Mueller answers, "Yes,

¹⁸⁹ Mueller, interview.

but what is the most important thing?”¹⁹⁰ He does this to always remind the children that Christ and their need for a Savior is the most important thing. No matter what happens to those children going out from the camp, they can hold on to that simple truth of God’s love.

You are able to use the camp to associate with those families. Mueller provides ways to keep the connection and enhance the relationship during the camp. First he invites the parents to stay at the camp. If they do, he makes sure they are in earshot of the devotion. Secondly, he gives each child a sports bible to look up passages, and the parents can help look those up and follow along themselves. He uses sports stories and analogies to teach the lesson of John 3:16 and other lessons from Scripture. Third, he gives a handout each day with a message, bible passage, and information they learned both sport related and spiritual. The fourth thing he enjoys doing is having a parent’s night. He has the kids come back to show some key skills they learned. This may be a quick scrimmage or drill, and has the pastor give a quick devotion into the parents’ lives of what the kids learned. This allows the pastor to announce service times and provide more information on the congregation. In his experience, not everyone comes, but it makes another connection. He often tries to have the camp at a neutral setting, like a public school gym to have a non-threatening setting. Then he follows up with the parent night at the church in their gym or parking lot. Sometimes he invites mascots from local teams to have a bigger draw like the Marquette golden eagle, the Timberwolves mascot, and the Golden Gopher. He is looking for the families to have visited the church, feel comfortable with being there, leave them with a good relationship, and a bible. The fifth thing he stresses is the follow-up visit to keep the conversation going. Maybe give each child a camp certificate or something extra from camp, and asks what they are looking for in a church, in their life. It is a valuable practice to have parents put a church home down on the registration sheet to have some reference, but many times people put a church down out of guilt or to safeguard themselves, so whatever the case may be, just make a connection and continue to get to know people in your area. Lastly, Mueller tries to connect them with another event at church, maybe a VBS later in summer, singing a song in church, or just general events offered by the church. He does not do all these things at every church depending

¹⁹⁰ Mueller, interview.

on their situation, but they are valuable to keep in mind and figure something out that works for your church.¹⁹¹

Both Tim Mueller and I believe in doing the camp well, showing excellence for Christ. We do not want it to just be a surface sports camp which gives the basic skills and a quick devotion. The point of the camp is not to end there being content with what you have done. A camp focused on Christ gets to the heart and does the camp for specific reasons. If you do not do it well or do not have a reason for doing something, why should the people watching or playing? In his experience, Mueller says a well-established camp can invite more children, share the gospel with families in the neighborhood, and even gives the possibility of having them come to your school. Our camps show excellence in a different way through the coaching and the overall approach to the camp. “The camp is Christ-centered and child-centered, but not sport-centered. The ultimate goal is to reach kids and share God’s love.”¹⁹² Churches should be reasonable, but not be cheap especially in the first year when you are making impressions and connecting to new people. You do not have to break the bank. Your thought should always be to leave a good impression and have them interested in coming again next year. Even more, have them be interested in what the church has to offer, which is Christ.

What you offer comes from knowing the community. In Mankato, the only soccer camps I could find were offered at the colleges in the area for hundreds of dollars. The local youth soccer club was well-established, but not cheap. St. Paul’s saw an opportunity to offer a relatively cheap soccer camp. To get the word out, St. Paul’s decided to make a thick colored paper brochure to hand out at events where kids and their families would be, such as airshows, parades, and festivals. We offered different dry fit t-shirts for each team. The shirts cost the church \$12.50 each, but they left an impression. St. Paul’s charged \$20 for the first sibling and \$10 every additional sibling to hit the community at a reasonable price that covered our start-up costs. We hosted a Lenten soup supper to fundraise a couple more dollars for volunteer shirts. In the first year, we ended up having 70 children register and reinvested any extra money in equipment for the future. Mueller ran a camp in California where the surrounding areas all charged over \$100, and there a \$75 charge was considered cheap. Every place is different. Some

¹⁹¹ Mueller, interview.

¹⁹² Mueller, interview.

churches have no startup money while others have grants or money saved up. You can use local businesses and companies to help defer costs. After a few years, you can reduce the price and not give out as many materials like balls or water bottles to just break even and make relationships.¹⁹³

Maintaining and organizing the camp help keep the focus clear. It is valuable, but not necessary to have new devotions each year. In either case, try to present it in different ways and make it apply to their lives. Mueller finds working in smaller groups of 25 kids or fewer works better to gear the devotion to their level and spiritual need grouped by similar age. The member students can assist in showing knowledge and excitement for God's Word.¹⁹⁴ Once a church figures out the drills and how to set everything up, all that needs to change is the devotion and/or curriculum. The church can also review what the children did and possibly switch in and out drills that may or may not have worked. Mueller sees, "We teach really good theology in WELS. How does that relate to character? Work on manners, leadership qualities, and being a team. It is vital for them to understand life, not just to be successful, but tie God's Word into it."¹⁹⁵ Use the teens of the congregation to be active coaches who are learning too. When a church creates a system of bringing children up in this setting, a huge benefit for the camp is having the children who attended the camp to be coaches when they are older. Involving the youth in active roles of leadership helps promote mentoring both for the teens and the kids in the camp. It has them feel involved and that they are a part of the ministry while they make relationships with children in the community.

These are some of the takeaways from the sports camps we have been involved that I feel can be valuable to churches as they think about their own sports ministry. There are so many little intricacies to putting on a camp that churches need to figure out to make this ministry their own. Taking ownership of the product you create demonstrates what matters to your church, to its people. This ministry is still growing and will always be adapting in the context of society and there will always be more aspects of it to figure out. One extremely helpful area we didn't touch on is training the leaders to have everyone be on the same page and be prepared to put on a good camp. What do parents think when there is chaos and disorganization when they are dropping

¹⁹³ Mueller, interview.

¹⁹⁴ Mueller, interview.

¹⁹⁵ Mueller, interview.

their child off? It is important to think critically about every little aspect of your camp, from where kids will be dropped off to how kids will go to the bathroom and get a snack, to making sure everyone can hear instructions and devotion. A lot goes into the camp to make it a success, but God works and takes the lead. He is the focus throughout and the biggest takeaway for the kids leaving.

5. Conclusion: Can the Church Challenge Sports?

The church on its own cannot challenge sports. The American society is in love with sport and bases its life around it. In the past, the church tried limiting sports, but now it is not much better. Hoffman warns, “Christians’ indiscriminate acceptance of sports is just as dangerous as our ancestors’ indiscriminate rejection of sports.”¹⁹⁶ The danger of sport is evident in today’s society with fanaticism, materialism, and worshipping sports idols all being prevalent. At the same time, the church cannot suddenly do another 180-degree turn to be against sport. The only option is to educate the people of the church to use it in a godly way, just as we use all the other blessings God has given to us. Sports can be a great resource for the church to keep members healthy, unite them together in activities, used to teach children life skills, and evangelize to make relationships with the community.

We need to ask ourselves, what is the church trying to accomplish through the sport? If you expect people to just walk into the church with no religion integrated into your sports, the sports ministry will not be effective. If you just have a sports program because all the other schools and churches do, reevaluate why you do it. Like any other secular event or hobby, it is easy for sports to take over if you are not careful. If we try to use sport on our own, without God’s help, our sports ministry spirals out of control because you do it for the wrong motives. You have sports to maintain the status quo and to stay relevant.

There are aspects of sport to wrestle with and think critically about. The church needs to figure out when sport has gone too far. Let us think rationally of sport for a moment, “Play is where life lives. Where the game is the game. At its borders, we slip into heresy. Become serious. Lose our sense of humor. The game becomes winning. And we lose the good life and the

¹⁹⁶ Shirl Hoffman, “Sports Fanatics: How Christians have succumbed to the sports culture—and what might be done about it,” *Christianity Today*, January 29, 2010, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2010/february/sports-fanatics-football-shirl-hoffman.html>, (accessed December 1, 2015.)

good things that play provides.”¹⁹⁷ When does the game become an idol? In my research, there is not a firm answer or anyone looking that deeply into this question. The church needs to keep a careful eye on those taking sport too far into fanaticism. Know your people, situation, and what they can handle. You would not want to encourage people to play sport who are struggling with it. For someone struggling with gambling, you would not constantly talk about playing cards. You also would not have a sermon introduction about waiting for the river card and seeing Christ come out of nowhere to save you. The church has to be there in its camps and schools to put sport in its proper place. Hoffman understands sport is easily threatened by greed, where athletes push to win by any means necessary. When sports turn a giggly 13-year-old girl into a steely-eyed water assassin to be an Olympic swimmer, Hoffman sees a problem. When a sport drives a 13-year-old to be spitting, grunting, and clapping at her opponents, there might be an issue to watch for.¹⁹⁸ Sport easily transforms to be all about the individual. When this is not combated by proper instruction, it is easy for individuals to take sport too far.

Mueller says, “A lot of people don’t see sports as a tool, but a way of life. When there is competition between WELS schools to the point of a rivalry, it is easy to get sucked in. Some of those kids go to the local Lutheran High School and are friends, but what about those who don’t? What is their opinion of other Lutheran schools?”¹⁹⁹ But the question we need to think most critically about is why we go to see and participate in sport. Hoffman believes our society doesn’t:

“Go to sporting events to see the Sermon on the Mount in action; pregame sermons for players are not crafted around Paul’s instructions to the faithful to shun vainglory and to avoid provoking one another. Do we honestly expect athletes performing in front of 90,000 partisan fans to embody humility? Do we really expect the basketball court to be a place where players put the concerns of others ahead of their own? –he concludes – probably not.”²⁰⁰

If this is our situation in America, we need to take a step back. This is not an easy thing, but we need to take the focus off of winning. “We are fortunate to have a forgiving God. I wasn’t the person I wanted to be. Sports can bring the worst if you are not careful.”²⁰¹ We need

¹⁹⁷ George Sheehan, “*Playing*,” 83.

¹⁹⁸ Hoffman, *Good Game*, 149.

¹⁹⁹ Mueller, interview.

²⁰⁰ Hoffman, *Good Game*, 156.

²⁰¹ Mueller, Interview.

Scripture's warning because if we are not honoring God when we play, we are still honoring something else. Only our heart really knows what that is, but we need to decide the role sport has in our world.

Every year teams start fresh with new life. They have the hope of victory and this drives them. When they obtain it, their victory does taste sweet for a time. On the other side, though, there is always a loss at some point and it can hurt like death itself. People search for truth, a victory in this world, and the church has it. They have the greatest truth this world has ever known. Our Savior bought our contract for eternity with the highest price possible in his innocent blood. God in his grace forgives us for worshipping sport, for giving in during the heat of the moment. The only way the church can challenge sport is with Christ leading the charge. His victory gives a feeling greater than any world championship title could. He offers us the glory of the heavenly kingdom never to suffer or cry in defeat or ever sin again. This victory will be sweet, but God wants us to finish the work he has planned for us. Jesus commands us to preach the good news to all people and gave us the freedom to choose how we accomplish it. Why not use sports to accomplish that goal? As long as sport is in a state that does not cause us to sin, we are able to use it to glorify God and let our light shine. God wants us to enjoy sports, but he demands to be the first priority in your life. His love means more than sports. Sports are just a small thing in our lives; the most important thing is the relationship with our Savior. Whether it is in a sports camp or a pickup game after work, put the Word forward in truth and purity. Faithfully use your time and talents. Let the Holy Spirit work through your Christian witness. God is in control. Now go play to his glory.

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7. Appendices

Appendix A: Senior Thesis Questionnaire for Tim Mueller



WISCONSIN LUTHERAN SEMINARY

Thesis concept: Penetrating the American love affair with sports, how churches can make use of the current cultural situation to further the message of Christ through the use of sports.

By John Paustian

- ✘ How do you see sports in our society affecting the church?

- ✘ What role should sports have in the church?

- ✘ What are you looking to accomplish with the sports camps you have written and done?

- ✘ How do you work to keep the focus on Christ during your camps?

- ✘ When a child leaves your camp, what do you want them to remember? And how do you work to accomplish that goal?

- ✘ What steps have you used to attempt to integrate the children and their families into the local congregation?

- ✘ Do you see value in churches using sports more throughout the year instead of just one camp in summer? If yes, in your opinion, what would be the best way to establish this?

- ✘ You mentioned last time we talked about working with NPH on a sports camp, how is that progressing?



WISCONSIN LUTHERAN SEMINARY

Thesis concept: Penetrating the American love affair with sports, how churches can make use of the current cultural situation to further the message of Christ through the use of sports.

By John Paustian

- ✘ How do sports fit in your Christian life?.

- ✘ Where is God in your mind/heart during the Football game?

- ✘ How does your faith affect how you play the game?

- ✘ You know these high-level athletes, how is their faith life? How do they view sports in relation to their faith?

- ✘ What impact did Kevin, I, and others on the team have at Wisconsin?

- ✘ How do you see sports in our society affecting the church?

- ✘ What role should sports have in the church?

Appendix C: Sample Soccer Camp Brochure



Appendix D: 507 Soccer Camp Logo



Appendix E: Sample of Biblical City Logos



Appendix F: Sample Day of Camp

Day One – Eden – Passing

8:45 – 9:00: Arrival – sign in and go to team area, where kids warm-up with previous day’s key drill (the first day do name learning drill exercise) passing drill here

Upper warm-up: pass in a circle and say the name of the one they pass to Lower warm-up:

9:00 – 9:05 Roll Call – Attendance for who is there (team leader make sure to know how many kids you have) (*Welcome + intro each day – helps with late kids*)

Line up by team, sit in a row (used for devotion, snack, skill explanation, stretching/prayer, and pickup)

9:05-9:10: Intro to Camp – This is the 507 Soccer Camp. Why do you think we are called that? 507 is our area code here in Mankato. This is a camp for the youth from across the area to come and learn about soccer and to make relationships with other people in this city. We are all connected here and will make lasting friendships as we learn some new soccer skills and some new life skills – like working together, the values of hard work and discipline, and many more. Every day we will learn a little more about the city of Mankato that we live in. But we will also learn about some other very important cities each day. If you look around you see some other jerseys. Each team jersey represents an ancient biblical city and each day this week we will learn about that city, what happened there, and how it affects our lives today. Let us know introduce our teams: We have the Mt. Sinai Crew (give time to stand up so everyone can see), Bethlehem F.C., Capernaum City, Jerusalem City, and finally the Eden Garden Squad.

Intro Garden of Eden (**where it was**- a garden in the east where God put the man he had created, four rivers separated from the river flowing through the garden (main two are Tigris and Euphrates); **who was there**-Adam, Eve, God, all animals, **what it was like there**-perfect among trees, the trees were pleasing to the eyes and good for food, one command – to not eat from the tree in the middle of the garden (tree of the knowledge of good and evil), Adam and Eve walked among the trees with God!

9:10-9:25: Daily Skill Explanation – Passing

Upper: Lock ankle, drive through center of the ball with the inside of your foot

Pass with pace, leaving it short isn't going to help

Lower: don't use your toe, use the inside of your foot

All start with the basic drill: partner up and pass 5 feet away. Work on keeping the ankle locked to keep the ball going straight.

{Upper can work on increasing distance of pass}

9:25-10:15: Drill Stations (50 minutes would be 10 minutes per station)

Ground drill – on back, keep ankle locked, partner drops ball and you pass it up

Upper: Keep Away drill with 2 in middle

Lower: 1 in middle

(Substitute Drill)Upper: Give and Go

Soccer Ball Smash

Upper: Lead pass through cones

Lower: pass through gates standing

Circle with 5 points – pass and sprint to where you pass (can add defender)

10:15-10:30: Water Break – Devotion/Story Interaction (Team of the day could interact)

Adam and Eve lived happily and perfectly in the Garden. Live was good for them and they walked with God among the trees. But Satan in a form of a serpent came and tricked Eve, tempted her to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil to have power and understanding like God. She saw the fruit was appealing to the eye and she ate it. She also gave some to Adam. Immediately, they had knowledge of good and evil and knew what they had done wrong. They saw they were naked and they were ashamed so they hid in the garden. When God came and walked through the garden, he called out to Adam and Eve knowing what they had done. Adam and Eve came to God and passed the blame to one another and to the serpent. God passes out judgment because of the first sin BUT gives the promise to send a Savior to save them

from their sin. They will suffer on this earth as a result of sin and they will feel the pains of death. But God wants them to pass on the news of a Savior to their children so that all people can be saved from eternal death. They have passed on the good news of a Savior to their children and their children. When their descendants departed from putting their trust in God's promise, bad things happened and many faced eternal death as a consequence. That is why passing on the promise of the Savior is so important. We will see in the coming days how this promise was passed on and what the result of the promise is. But remember the most important thing is to trust in God and his promises, for if we depart from his love, nothing good will come.

10:30-11:00: Drill Station (Have two stations, interchange in time allotted to have every team do each drill)

Keep your square clean (3 teams)

Ball on a pedestal/Tug of War (2 teams)

11:00-11:15: Snack/water – Recap Day's story and app for today/parallel between soccer + life

The pass is like telling an important message. If you don't pass it hard enough, others might not hear. If you pass it way over there, your message isn't going to connect with people. If your pass doesn't get to your teammate you are in trouble. And if you don't spread the good news of salvation confidently, others might be in trouble because they might not know the forgiveness of sins that comes from Christ and we want them to be in Heaven someday with us.

Snack brought to team lines to be able to hear recap and application at same time

11:15-11:45: Team games/Scrimmages

5 games of 5 minutes or less (If you have 5 teams, one will sit. But many kids enjoy the break)

11:45-12:00: Wrap-Up: Stretching-prayer-announcements.