

# REDEEMING SPORTS



**Why winning really isn't everything.**

**A**mericans are consuming sports on an unprecedented scale," Shirl James Hoffman notes in the article "Whatever Happened to Play?" "The ancient Romans, long considered the gold standard for how sports-crazed a culture could be, were dilettantes compared to the sports fans of this century."

Evangelical presence pervades the sports world, in everything from team chaplains to post-game prayers. But do we give this massive part of modern life the philosophical and theological attention it deserves? And what happens if we don't?

**Scripture:** Isaiah 40:26–31; Romans 12:1–8; 1 Corinthians 9:19–27; Hebrews 12:1–2

**Based on:** "Whatever Happened to Play" and "Are Sports the Problem?," CHRISTIANITY TODAY, February 2010



## Part 1 **IDENTIFY THE CURRENT ISSUE**

*Note to leader: Provide each person with "Whatever Happened to Play" and "Are Sports the Problem?" from CHRISTIANITY TODAY, included at the end of this study.*

We live in a sports-crazed culture. Whether donning our teams' colors, poring over sports sections, or—in an extreme case—dropping the ashes of a relative on a professional football field, we take athletic endeavors seriously indeed. In the article "Whatever Happened to Play," Shirl James Hoffman notes, "But [all] are rooted in the same passion that drives spectators to paint their faces with team colors, wear bizarre hats, and engage in the collective delirium that one philosopher has called 'too close to the religious to call it anything else.'" And this sports *fanaticism* includes Christians, too. We have overcome our initial skepticism about sports and have jumped in with both feet. Christians have a growing and visible presence in sports.

But Hoffman suggests that too often we do our sports ministries pragmatically and not theologically. Because we don't know what sports are *for*, we are unable to redeem sporting culture and reap the spiritual benefits that it can provide.

### **Discussion Starters:**

[Q] How important are sports in your life, judging by the time you spend attending, talking about, and spending money on them?

- Do you think this is healthy? Why or why not?

[Q] We seem to idolize our athletic heroes more than ever. Why might this be?

[Q] How have college and professional sports changed both for the better and the worse since you've been watching them?

[Q] What positive messages do we get from sports?

[Q] What negative messages do we get?

## Part 2 **DISCOVER THE ETERNAL PRINCIPLES**

**Teaching Point One: Every legitimate area of human life, including sports, can be redeemed for God's glory.**

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Hoffman says that too often sports are an excuse for self-absorption rather than self-denial and self-aggrandizement rather than self-giving. “Further, while honesty, sympathy, and generosity are the idealized derivatives of a life lived with God, recent data reveal that immersion in a culture devoted to proving one’s superiority squelches rather than reinforces these virtues.”

We have seen the downward trend in sports, with excessive, individualized celebrations of accomplishment, the attempt to physically dominate and intimidate the opposition, and the craving for victory over others at any cost, even if this means cutting corners on the rules or taking banned substances. Yet God’s Word has principles that apply in the hyper-competitive world of sports.

Read Romans 12:1–8.

**[Q]** Sports culture is corrupt at points, which makes Paul’s commands in verse 2a—“Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind”—especially applicable. Christians involved in sports are not to *conform*, but to *transform*. What areas of sports culture ought we to reject?

- How do we renew our mind in regard to sports?

**[Q]** As we are transformed, Paul says, God will lead us into “his good, pleasing and perfect will” (v. 2b). How might this promise apply to our sports ministries?

**[Q]** We are not to think more highly of ourselves than we ought but rather are to take sober stock of our gifts, which come from God (vv. 3–8). While this section applies primarily to church contexts, what attitudes do you see that apply in our athletic endeavors? Are there ways to encourage these godly attitudes on the playing field and in the locker room? In the stands?

**Teaching Point Two: Every legitimate area of human life, including sports, can be a platform for ministry if we are willing to work at it.**

“If indeed sport is marching toward Gomorrah,” Hoffman states, “it seems to have escaped the attention of large portions of the evangelical community, which continue to bask in the reflected glory of Christian athletes. Much evangelical commentary glorifies athletes and sports, but becomes timid in situations that warrant indictment. Rarely does the evangelical press ask touchy questions about tensions between the moral culture of Christianity and that of big-time sports. The silence is deafening.”

Yet a failure to do sports well does not mean that we shouldn’t do them at all. Hoffman calls for a critical evangelical engagement with the sports culture so that we can transform



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it and benefit from it. Paul knew something about engaging other cultures for the sake of the gospel. Missiologists call this process contextualization—putting the message in the garb of the people you are trying to reach. This involves taking what is good from the host culture—the context—and using it to accurately communicate the gospel without distortion. Humility is seldom prized in sports, but that's just what we need for this kind of ministry.

Read 1 Corinthians 9:19–27.

Sports are often used as vehicles for people to get what they want: money, fame, or sex, among other things. Paul's attitude was not to see how much he could get, however, but how much he could give. His goal was not personal victory, but the good of others: "I make myself a slave to everyone," he told the Corinthian believers, "to win as many as possible" (v. 19). Victory for Paul could be measured in lives saved and relationships established.

**[Q]** How does modern sports culture undercut this kind of emphasis, and how might it be transformed to support it?

**[Q]** Paul lists some ways he has contextualized the gospel, among both Jews and pagans (vv. 20–22). What might be some dangers Paul faced in presenting the gospel this way?

- What are some dangers of communicating in a sports context? How, according to Hoffman, are we tempted to compromise?
- What are some ways we can faithfully use sports to share the gospel?

**[Q]** Paul uses an athletic metaphor to describe his commitment to the gospel (vv. 24–27). What can Christians learn from athletic pursuits? Why and how are sports applicable to the Christian life and to gospel-focused ministry?

### **Teaching Point Three: The Christian life is a race that demands our perseverance as we follow Jesus.**

"Professional sports testify to an excess of money, success, and competitive zeal," Hoffman says. That excess points to a dearth in another area—a focus on God. Much of professional sports, and of the college and youth arenas that imitate them, causes athletes to focus on the self. Hoffman further says, "If evangelical ethicist R. E. O. White is right to assert that self-absorption is behind all wrong social relationships and, for this reason, self-denial is the first ethical condition of discipleship, then elite athletes immersed in the



self-consumed atmosphere of sports, where self-denial is a recipe for competitive disaster, face a fundamental problem.” So how do we take the focus off ourselves and put it onto Christ?

Read Hebrews 12:1–2.

**[Q]** Having finished describing the so called “hall of faith” in Hebrews 11, the writer of this epistle paints a picture of the Christian life as a race in a stadium packed with cheering fans—those who have run before us (v. 1a). How might your spiritual journey be different if you knew that other saints of the past were cheering you on?

**[Q]** The writer encourages us to strip away all that “hinders” and “entangles” us (v. 1b). What slows down your “race”?

**[Q]** Then we are told to “run with perseverance” and that we each have a particular “race marked out for us.” How do analogies from the world of sport help us here?

**[Q]** We are to “fix our eyes on Jesus” (v. 2). What kind of race did he run? In what ways does his victory differ from conventional notions of winning and losing?

#### **Teaching Point Four: Sports can give us a vision of life with God, in this world and the next.**

We often see sport as a means to a worldly end. Sports are so concrete, so physical, that we miss the way they affect the way we think and view this world, and how they prepare us for the next. We often fail to see the “possibility that sport, properly organized and played, can inspire rather than challenge the Christian imagination,” Hoffman writes. In other words, what is the aim of the Christian life, and how can sports help us see it? Read Isaiah 40:26–31.

**[Q]** In the view of such majesty, what ought we to be boasting in? How does this perspective help in the sporting life?

**[Q]** When we feel small and forgotten (v. 27), we do well to remember God’s great strength and wisdom (v. 28). How does that perspective help with what you are struggling with right now?

**[Q]** God shares his strength with his weak children (v. 29). Why must we be weak to receive his strength?

- How is this antithetical to the sports culture?

**[Q]** Good promises to overcome our weakness (v. 30) and renew our strength (v. 31). We will “soar on wings like eagles”; we will “run and not grow weary.” Intimacy and life with this powerful God are pictured in athletic terms, as physical limitations are removed. How do sports prepare us to enjoy life with God?

### Part 3 **APPLY YOUR FINDINGS**

While the ancient Greeks understood the essentially religious nature of sports, evangelicals have been late in getting in the game. First we saw athletic endeavors as unserious and unworthy of our time. Then we changed our minds, but instead of transforming them for the glory of God, we allowed them to transform us. This is because we little understood the power of play and became subverted by it.

Shirl James Hoffman says we need to recapture the essence of play so that we can apply its lessons and prepare ourselves for that perfect harmony of mind and body that awaits us in the new creation. We need to see sports in the meantime as an activity that can be redeemed for God's glory, as a legitimate platform for ministry, as a model for the good Christian life, and as preparation for life with God.

While much of our culture has also been subverted by the excitement of sports, it is missing something deeper and more profound—joy—which points us to the great God who created us with the ability to strive, to improve, and, simply, to play. “If sport played by Christians is to have a distinctive slant—especially sport sponsored by Christian institutions—it won't simply be sport done well, or played without egregious violations of the sporting code,” Hoffman says. “It will be sport creatively structured and specifically crafted to express the joy of the faith.”

**Action Point:** *Have each member draw up a list of hindrances and entanglements in his or her Christian life. In a confidential session, have your group pray for the removal of these things, then follow up at the next meeting to see how it is going.*

**Optional Activity:** *As a group, choose a sporting activity—softball, chess, or whatever—and do it together for the glory of God.*

— Stan Guthrie is author of the forthcoming *All That Jesus Asks: How His Questions Can Teach and Transform Us* (Baker). A CT editor at large, he writes a column for [BreakPoint.org](http://BreakPoint.org) and blogs at [stanguthrie.com](http://stanguthrie.com).

## RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

☰ Check out the following Bible studies at: [ChristianBibleStudies.com](http://ChristianBibleStudies.com)

☰ **Finding God in Sports** This discussion guide will help you look at the point behind sports in God's economy. How are serious sports meant to reflect discipleship, community, and even Sabbath?

☰ **Resisting the Mob Mentality** This study looks at the mysterious phenomenon of crowd behavior. What makes us act in a crowd in ways we wouldn't individually? How can we find the strength to go against the grain when we need to? And when can crowd behavior be a positive thing?

☰ **Remember the Titans Family Discussion Guide** Sports can build character and teach us life lessons. This is the case with the true story portrayed in the film *Remember the Titans*. In 1971 an Alexandria, Virginia, high school football team finds that their most intimidating opponent is themselves as they struggle with racial integration. This discussion guide will help your family discuss the themes of courage, leadership, and racial unity found in this movie.

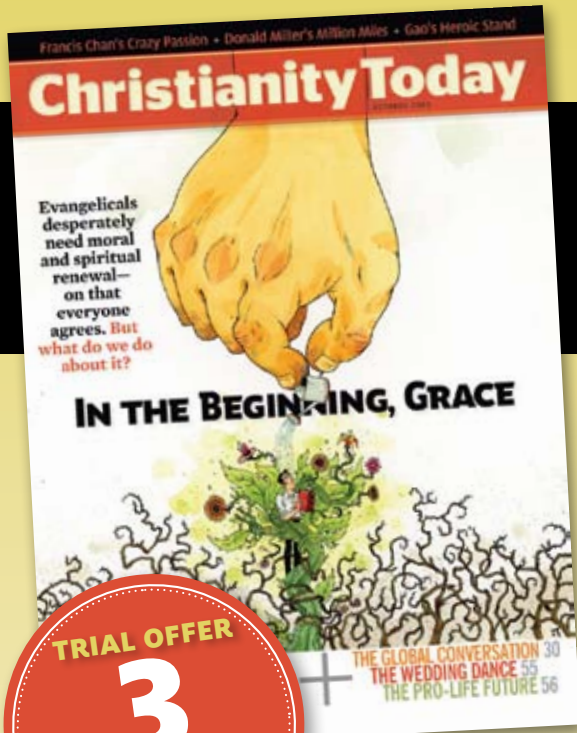
⦿ **Chariots of Fire** (Warner Home Video, 1981). The story of British athlete Eric Liddell, who said, "When I run, I feel God's pleasure."

☰ Missionary Athletes International seeks to spread the gospel through soccer "as a resource to the body of Christ." See <http://www.maisoccer.com/main/>.

☰ Athletes in Action is a global ministry using professional and college sports to spread the gospel. See <http://www.athletesinaction.org/>.

☰ **Eric Liddell**, Men and Women of Faith Series, by Catherine Swift (Bethany House, 1990). Eric Liddell, hero of the film *Chariots of Fire*, risked becoming a national disgrace at the 1924 Paris Olympics when he refused to run on a Sunday.

☰ **The Blind Side: Evolution of a Game**, by Michael Lewis (W.W. Norton, 2007). "One day Michael Oher will be among the most highly paid athletes in the National Football League. When we first meet him, he is one of 13 children by a mother addicted to crack; he does not know his real name, his father, his birthday, or how to read or write. He takes up football, and school, after a rich, white, evangelical family plucks him from the streets." A fascinating look at football and ministry.



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