

interface

A Forum for Theology in the World

Modern day sports people and spectators might readily use the divine name, or Jesus Christ, as expletives of frustration or exclamations of triumph, but they would rarely make a connection between games and religion. Support for one's team might occasionally reach the heights of religious zeal, but associating athletic prowess with piety would be far from the thinking of most performers and onlookers. Yet, there are moments when even our modern sports spectacles are conducted with quasi-religious rituals.

These links, these intersections, are drawing greater academic interest in the early part of this new millennium with conferences in the USA in 2004 and in the UK in 2007 and tertiary-based courses springing up in several universities around the world.

This collection of essays examines the links between sport, spirituality and everyday theology from the ancient Greek dominated world right through to the modern day olympics. It comes at this examination from a Judaeo-Christian perspective.

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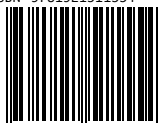


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**Sport And Spirituality:
An Exercise In Everyday
Theology**

edited by Gordon Preece and Rob Hess



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Sport And Spirituality: An Exercise In Everyday Theology

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Editorial

Gordon Preece and Rob Hess

The intersection between sport and spirituality has attracted unprecedented academic interest in the first decade of the twenty-first century, as a general survey of the field in this volume by Rob Hess shows. One sign of a quickening of interest in the area has been the emergence of academic conferences devoted to the theme, with one (held in the United States in 2004) generating considerable interest among the sport history community, and another (held in Great Britain in 2007) providing the impetus for the establishment of the *International Journal of Religion and Sport*. Other beacons have been tertiary courses devoted to the field, notably a new unit 'Sport and Spirituality' taught by former Olympian Richard Pengelly at the University of Western Australia, and the newly established Centre for the Study of Sport and Spirituality at York St John University in England.¹

Alongside these developments has been a steady stream of related academic publications, reflective of the growing general interest in the discipline of sports studies.² While a detailed literature review is not the intention of this introduction, a listing of several pertinent books gives an indication of how publications in the field have flowered in recent times. A small chronological selection from the last decade and a half reveals such works as the collection by Hoffman, *Sport and Religion*,³ the national study by Higgs, *God in the Stadium: Sports and Religion in America*,⁴

1. See, respectively, Brendan O'Keefe, 'UWA Resurrects Sport's Spiritual Parallels', *Australian*, 8 November 2006, 25, and <http://sportspirituality.yorksja.ac.uk>
2. The academic study of sport history, in particular, is a burgeoning field, with societies existing in North America, Britain and Australia, as well as other places in the world. The first such society was the North American Society for Sport History, which was formed in 1973. For a recent overview of the field, see Martin Johnes, 'Putting the History into Sport: On Sport History and Sports Studies in the UK', *Journal of Sport History*, vol. 31, no. 2 (Summer 2004), 145-160.
3. Shirl J. Hoffman, editor, *Sport and Religion* (Champaign: Illinois, 1992).
4. Robert J. Higgs, *God in the Stadium: Sports and Religion in America* (Lexington:

Magdalinski and Chandler's international anthology, *With God on Their Side: Sport in the Service of Religion*,⁵ and Baker's substantive *Playing with God: Religion and Modern Sport*.⁶ Most recent of all is *Sport and Spirituality*, a publication instigated by key players in the international conference of the same name.⁷ While the majority of these titles have their basis in the social sciences, particularly history and social psychology, none have the concentrated theological focus of the articles contained in this issue.

The essays then move in a more specifically Christian direction with Gordon Preece's preview of what a Protestant play ethic might look like. Vic Pfitzner's enlightening survey of ancient and biblical athletic imagery maintains the strong theological and Christian focus. As does Synthia Sydnor's robust apologia of a distinctively Catholic view of the body, femininity and sport. Richard Hutch's 'Sport, Sailing and Human Spirituality' illustrates one of the perils or perhaps potentials of a venture such as this journal. Authors can operate with quite different definitions of spirituality. Hutch elects to go with William James' definition of spirituality as what individuals do with their solitude with the divine. Others, one editor (Preece) included, would have a more corporate definition of spirituality. The editors chose not to be definitive or prescriptive to the authors at this point.

In attempting to outline 'A Protestant Play Ethic', Gordon Preece bounces off Eric Liddell's remark to his spiritually concerned sister Jenny in the 1981 Oscar-winning film *Chariots of Fire*. Liddell eases her worries concerning his vocation to the mission field, but only after he runs in the Olympics. He says: 'God made me *fast* Jenny, and when I run, I feel God's pleasure'. The alleged clash between Jenny and Eric Liddell is emblematic of that between those who see sport as either unspiritual or redeemable as a utilitarian means to spiritual ends for

University Press of Kentucky, 1995).

5. Tara Magdalinski and T. J. L. Chandler, editors, *With God on Their Side: Sport in the Service of Religion* (London: Routledge, 2002).
6. William J. Baker, *Playing with God: Religion and Modern Sport* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007). See also his earlier lecture series, William J. Baker, *If Christ Came to the Olympics* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2000).
7. Jim Parry, Simon Robinson, Nick J. Watson and Mark Nesti, editors, *Sport and Spirituality: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2007).

example evangelism (Jenny) and those who see sport as an expression of spirituality, as intrinsically good in God's eyes.

Preece uses Eric Liddell's comment as a stimulus toward a long-overdue Protestant Play Ethic. He first sets play in the context of a theology of divine and human pleasure. Then he narrates certain forms of play as pleasurable ends in themselves, firstly the personal, female story of Stephanie Paulsell's running and then the more corporate one of Credo Cricket, critiquing various utilitarian perversions of play as mere means to an end.

Victor C Pfitzner's essay is entitled 'We are the Champions! Origins and Developments of the Image of God's Athletes'. He notes:

That games and gods belonged together was taken for granted in the ancient world, whether at the classical Greek athletic contests of Olympia, Nemea, Pythia or Isthmia, at the dramatic contests in Athens, or at the more bellicose and brutal gladiatorial games of the Romans. Contests between the gods belong to the oldest myths of Greek literature, so it is not surprising that the origins and ideals of the great national contests were found in the myths of gods and heroes.

The great fifth century BCE tragedians and philosophers laid claim to greater strength and skill than the athletes though.

However, ancient Hebrew contains no words for athletic games. It is in the intersection between Hebraic and Hellenistic culture that the use of athletic imagery comes to the fore in Judeo-Christian contexts. The Maccabean martyrs are portrayed in such terms in their contest against the Hellenists. Philo portrays Moses, Joseph, Enoch, Noah, and even the wandering Israelites as God's athletic champions competing against human passions, not for personal but divine glory. Athletic imagery is baptized by the apostle Paul, speaking of himself and his co-workers in such terms in 1 Cor 9:24–27 among other passages. The book of Hebrews portrays the Christian martyr athlete. Stoic sages, Maccabean martyrs, Christian apostles compete as much with internal as external opponents. Pfitzner concludes by arguing for the positive use of sporting imagery as far preferable to the use of militaristic imagery today.

Synthia Sydnor's essay sets issues related to sport and femininity in terms of Christian, and specifically Catholic thought. She has two

purposes: First, to outline a rationale for taking such a topic seriously in contrast to how academia and journalism in the past two decades regarding 'femininity and sport' has rarely included a Christian reading of these issues; Second, she testifies to becoming a Catholic and researching Pope John Paul II's 'theology of the body' as a new kind of feminism in Christ applicable to the study of sport.

This 'new feminism' of John Paul II, identifies the male 'debt' owed to women, who sacrifice 'for the bearing of life' (Leonie Caldecott) as a key concept liberating to culture. In usual studies concerning femininity and sport, the paradigm of liberation, of openness, is dominant. Why not, Sydnor suggests, put this in dialogue with John Paul II's conception of a human rational and wisdom-based culture forming an 'organic whole with nature'. In predominantly secular American sport sociology, it has been too long taboo to dialogue with such an alternative philosophy and phenomenology of bodily movement, play and competition. This papal perspective challenges the exoticizing and making definitive of particular sub-cultures and practices of women in sport in third wave feminist ethnography.

John Paul II's body theology challenges the dominant monologue on gender and sport studies because it asserts that the body reveals God, it is a gift from God. Because feminine nature privileges women's distinct physical and spiritual capabilities for participating in the social order, modern dualism about women in sport is rejected in his theology of the body. Sydnor's use of John Paul II's theology of the body has interesting links with Preece's use of Paulsell's Christian feminist account of her rediscovery of bodily joy in running through the complementarity of running with her husband after losing that joy in the heat of adolescent angst and male-female antagonism.

Richard Hutch illustrates James' famous individualistic definition of spirituality which certainly fits his subject matter – that of lone, round-the-world-yachtsmen and women. Drawing on accounts from their journals, logs and interviews, Hutch highlights the tensions in the experience of such sailors: between self-confidence and awe before the ocean's power; between self-reliance and divine dependence. He sees solo sailing the globe as a microcosm of human smallness before the vastness of the universe which the Copernican Revolution opened up beyond the anthropocentric Ptolemaic universe. Facing death in the ocean's open

aways is a salutary spiritual experience as are the ‘interruptions to utopian aspirations and heightened positive aesthetic experiences individuals may enjoy at sea. The argument of this paper is that such interruptions can give rise to new moral postures toward living. These postures represent invigorated spiritual meaning and purpose...’

Chris Gardiner’s ‘The Call of the Game’ is written by a ‘reflective practitioner’. He is CEO of Police & Community Youth Clubs NSW, and a football (soccer) referee and club president. His essay is his way of ‘reflecting on how humans experience and build value through the rule-based activities called games, reflect on how important referees are to experiencing the value we seek, and think[ing] about the virtues that might be articulated to underpin the practice and service of the referee’. In this he draws on the ground-breaking work of Alisdair MacIntyre on how social practices shape virtues and our humanity.

Gardiner puts this personally and passionately: ‘like so many others, football matters to me—I love the game, it adds to my identity, it helps me explain what it means to be human—to my children, to my friends, to my community’. While Gardiner’s paper has little overt vertical spirituality of sport, it eloquently gives voice to its horizontal, human, communal aspect. However, for this to be maintained, for the game to ‘flow’, and for humans to flourish in their practice of it, rules and referees are required. His basic point is that ‘many of us respond to the “call of the game”, but whether we actually enjoy the resulting experience depends on the referee’s actual call of the game, and that, therefore, we should do more to ensure that that call is consistently excellent’. That sense of ‘flow’, of excellent, energetic humanity, flourishing in sport, may even echo a higher call, a divine pleasure in sweaty, spiritual sport, something Eric Liddell felt in his feet.