



Sports Fandom: Worthless Idol and Wonderful Thing

ROLF A. JACOBSON

Train yourself in godliness, for, while physical training is of some value, godliness is valuable in every way, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come. The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance. For to this end we toil and struggle, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe. (1 Timothy 4:7b–10)

THE PHENOMENON OF BEING A FAN

I am a sports fan.

I consume sports daily, in the same way that I consume calories. Many of my friends are sports fans, too. We used to play sports, and we try to stay active and exercise. But we no longer play sports. We watch, we follow, we root, we mourn. We are fans. We define ourselves, in part, by the teams we support—wearing the colors of our teams, sporting the names of star athletes on our backs, scheduling our lives around game time. We are a society of watchers, “amusing ourselves to death,” as Neil Postman aptly observed.¹ And for me and my friends, the main focus is sports.

¹*Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (London: Penguin, 1985).

When thinking about the spectacle of sports fandom in light of the Bible, two assertions immediately come to mind. First, sports have become—for much of North American or Western society—an idol. Second, sports have also co-opted many aspects of the life of faith. These two immediate perspectives are so obvious that one is left to wonder whether there is anything more to say about sports in light of the Bible. Maybe there is.

Sports and athletic competitions have existed for millennia. But the phenomenon of sports fandom is new. It helps to define who I am. And it does the same for many of my students, friends, colleagues, and acquaintances.

Can the Bible offer a relevant word for this experience? To be specific, can the Bible offer a word relevant to the unique, modern phenomenon of sports fandom?

any attempt to relate the witness of Scripture will have to take a tangential approach, wondering how the Bible might help us gain perspective on the unforeseeable spectacle of the modern sports-entertainment industry

The Bible as a whole lacks any narratives that involve sports or descriptions of sporting events or feats. And only a few passages refer to sports or competition at all—1 Cor 9:24–27; 2 Tim 2:5; Eccl 9:11 come to mind—but in these passages the references to athletics are illustrative material employed in support of a spiritual point. They are not *about* sports. It is safe to assume that ancient Israelites and Judeans had their games and athletic fun: athletic competitions and sporting games evolve naturally wherever humans gather in community. But the scribes who produced the Bible wrote nothing *about* sports.

From the surviving literature of Israel's neighbors, we know of sports and games from the Sumerians down through the Greeks and Romans. The ancient Greek Olympics ran from 776–394 B.C.E., a time coexistent with the Old Testament story. And there is surviving literature about sports from these ancients, notably from Aristotle and Plato.² But the ancient wisdom of these philosophers does not bear directly on the phenomenon of fandom.

So any attempt to relate the witness of Scripture will have to take a tangential approach, wondering how the Bible might help us gain perspective on the unforeseeable spectacle of the modern sports-entertainment industry. Or dare I say, “the mega sports-entertainment empire”?

When thinking about the spectacle of sports fandom in light of the Bible, two assertions immediately come to mind. First, sports have become—for much of North American or Western society—an idol. Second, sports have also co-opted many aspects of the life of faith. These two immediate perspectives are so obvious that one is left to wonder whether there is anything more to say about sports in light of the Bible. Maybe there is. But first, a word regarding each of these two immediate assertions.

SPORT: WORTHLESS IDOL?

In much of the modern, Western world, sport is an idol. Even those of you

²For a discussion of a “theology of play,” see the work of James V. Schall, *Play On: From Games to Celebrations* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971); Schall, *Far Too Easily Pleased: A Theology of Play, Contemplation, and Festivity* (Los Angeles: Benziger-Macmillan, 1976).

who may not choose to bend the knee at the altar of sport are probably affected directly by those of us who do worship sport.

In November 2014, I was preaching as a guest for a friend of mine, Pastor Steve Sylvester. The congregation he serves has three Sunday-morning worship services. Toward the start of the third service, Steve gestured toward the half-full sanctuary. “The Vikings must have a noon start today. Attendance at the 10:30 service is always down when they play at noon.” Steve was quiet for second, then he added, “Idols are bad. *Worthless* idols are *really* bad.” I remember thinking in that moment, “O wow, I may never be able to be a sports fan in quite the same way again.”

It is not a new observation, of course, to see sport as something of a false god.

Many years ago, Michael Novak wrote that “sports are at their heart a spiritual activity, a natural religion, a tribute to grace, beauty, and excellence.”³ A study published in 2013 by the Barna Group, which studies the intersection of faith and culture, claimed to have found that athletes have greater influence on the spiritual lives of Americans than pastors do.⁴

For many years I have heard pastors lament that some (many? most?) parents take their children’s sports commitments more seriously than church activities—parents schedule church around sports, not the other way around. The wise-as-a-serpent church leader programs around the NFL, not against it.

In one of the favorite sermons I have ever heard, my colleague Fred Gaiser gave voice to the arguments of several of the false gods that seek to claim us. One of the idols whose claims Gaiser took quite seriously was Sports:

I am Sports. I offer spectacle and spirit, competition and solidarity, teamwork and individual excellence, the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat. But not a god, you say? Ask yourself, who owns Sunday? Who gets your tithe? For whom will you sacrifice everything to build my cathedrals? Whose priests receive more pay? I *am* your god, America. Deal with it.

Gaiser also gave imaginative voice to the Living God’s response to each of these idols’ claims to lordship. Here is the imagined divine response to Sports:

Oh, sports. How noble you once were and still can be. But now, how pretentious. How will you claim high purpose now that you have prostituted yourself to the lesser deities of celebrity and greed? All you can deliver now is money—and that upwards on the food chain. What a disappointment you are. You have become a parasite. You consume more than you produce. You seduce the young, creating stars only to exploit and discard them. I sentence you to the punishment you deserve: uncapitalize yourself.⁵

³Michael Novak, *The Joy of Sports: Endzones, Bases, Baskets, Balls, and the Consecration of the American Spirit*, rev. ed. (Lanham, MD: Madison Books, 1994) 346.

⁴“Athletes Influence Greater than Faith Leaders,” The Barna Group, Feb 1, 2013, <https://www.barna.org/component/content/article/36-homepage-main-promo/602-barna-update-01-23-2013#.VZBV-xNViko> (accessed June 28, 2015).

⁵*Preaching the Old Testament* (St. Paul, MN: Luther Seminary Center for Biblical Preaching, 2007) DVD.

The argument that sport has become a false god is easy to make from several angles. Martin Luther famously wrote in his *Large Catechism* that “a god is that to which we look for all good and in which we find refuge in every time of need. . . . That to which your heart clings and entrusts itself is, I say, really your God.”⁶ Following this line of argument, it is easy to assert that, based on how much money, time, and emotion we devote to following and participating in sports, sports is a god in our culture. The Great Shema in Deuteronomy commands that the words of the Lord are to be bound hand and forehead, written on gatepost and doorway. But an observer is a million-and-a-half times more likely to find the name of a sports team or brand emblazoned on the apparel, bumper sticker, or home of even a practicing person of faith, than the name of that person’s God.

it is easy to assert that, based on how much money, time, and emotion we devote to following and participating in sports, sports is a god in our culture

Similarly, following sports has been shown to have significant emotional and physical impacts on fans. If you are a sports fan, ask yourself this: Did you feel sad or mad when your favorite team lost? Are you more likely to increase the size of your tip if your team won? Various studies have shown that fans are more likely to be depressed, to eat unhealthy food, to purchase less, or be more violent when their teams lose.⁷

The sports-as-false-god argument is easy to make. But it still needs to be made. This is the case because the dangers of false gods are ever the same—they lure people away by making promises that they cannot and will not keep. They cause the sort of spiritual and emotional damage that always happens when we give our hearts to things that can only be secondary at best—and that surely will disappoint. Moreover, with the sprawling, ever-increasing reach of the various social media, sports has gained the ability to reach out and touch each of us almost anywhere we go, with a semidivine type of omnipresence—at the park, during worship, during family time. We need to be ever on guard against the potential damage that might be caused in a world-gone-mad with sports. Sports so easily claims our allegiance, but it cannot satisfy. Or save. I am reminded of the Lord’s word to the Judean exiles: “I am the LORD your God, who teaches you for your own good, who leads you in the way you should go” (Isa 48:17).

⁶Martin Luther, “The Large Catechism,” in *The Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959) 365.

⁷“For disappointed fans, defeats increase consumption of fat and sugar,” Association for Psychological Science, August 21, 2013, <http://www.psychologicalscience.org/index.php/news/releases/for-disappointed-sports-fans-defeats-increase-consumption-of-fat-and-sugar-2.html> (accessed July 4, 2015).

SPORTS: CO-OPTING MENACE?

Even though I worry very greatly about the threat of sports as idolatry, I think that another, equally insidious, aspect of sports and religion may be more important: the way that sports and athletes so casually co-opt religious faith.

If one pays careful attention to American sports television for a good week or more, one will see countless examples of the sports co-opting the symbolism, Scriptures, and ritual of the Christian faith and redeploying them for the sake of marketing sport and claiming victory.

It is hard to know where or when this phenomenon started, but there are many examples of the athlete who wins, makes a spectacular play, or contributes at a key moment...and then makes some sort of faith gesture. Many images come to mind, for example, football player Tim Tebow kneeling in prayer after a play or touchdown. Strangely, kneeling, a very old worship ritual, somehow became rebranded as “Tebowing.” Or basketball player Steph Curry dropping in a rainbow three, turning to run down court and pointing toward the heavens in a gesture of thanks and praise. Again, members of both teams gathered at center field or court after the game, kneeling together in prayer, or countless victorious players being interviewed by the beautiful sideline reporter after the game, smiling and giving glory to God. The examples could be multiplied.

Most would wonder, “So what? What’s wrong with a person giving glory to God at an important moment in their life? As long as the athlete is praising the Creator for his or her natural, inherited athletic gifts and not suggesting that God cares who wins a game, isn’t this a good thing?”

Well, yes. Unless it isn’t. Unless this constant praise of God by athletic victors becomes the part of a dominating new narrative in which the story of Christ’s awful death on the cross at the hands of empire is co-opted by and subsumed under the greed of the new athletic-entertainment empire’s march.

The case of the great National Football League star Ray Lewis might serve as a case in point. As is well known, early in his career, Lewis was involved in a group altercation that left two men dead. During the legal proceedings, Lewis testified against two men he knew in exchange for a reduced charge that led to probation rather than prison. From that low and inauspicious beginning to his career, Lewis rose to become one of the most respected defensive players in football. He led his team to two Super Bowl titles and will probably be elected to the hall of fame one day. For the purposes of this essay, we note that Lewis’s very public profession of his Christian faith became a pronounced mark of his career.

Lewis not only drew personal strength from this faith, he led his team with his preaching. News stories reported that Lewis’s locker-room leadership involved not just his skill on the field and his charisma as a teammate, but explicit Christian witness and proclamation.

The voice spills stories from a book—a good book—the speaker believes and the men listen and nod and agree because many of the Baltimore Ravens read

this very same book. And because they trust the voice and they trust the Bible from which the voice reads, they believe the voice gives them strength. They believe it gives them unity. They believe it is helping them win.⁸

Following the last game of his career—a victory in Super Bowl XLVII—Lewis was asked how it felt to be a Super Bowl champion. Lewis responded, “When God is for you, who can be against you?”⁹

The case of Ray Lewis is fascinating and illuminating because it shines light on two of the most wonderful, powerful things about the Christian: changed lives and lives infused with Christian meaning.

First, the gospel changed Lewis’s life for the better. And that is a very good thing. Not just for Lewis and fellow Christians, but for everyone. The changed Lewis is not perfect—he remains a classic portrait of one who remains both sinful and justified. But unless a person looks on troubled souls with the resentment of a Hamlet who wishes for his uncle to die while still in his sins, lives changing for the better is a good thing.

Has a line been crossed when the stories and symbols of the scriptural tradition are “raided” more than read? When I look at the broader phenomenon of the way that Christian symbols and rituals are used by the sports-entertainment empire, it seems clear to me that there is a lot of that going on.

Second, Lewis seems to infuse his life with meaning by actively drawing on the stories, symbols, and compass points of the biblical story. Lewis does what I want all of my students to do and what I want them to equip the souls in their care to do: live deeply into and out of the stories and symbols of the Bible. And this includes his work life. Yes, Lewis has done that as a professional athlete. But don’t we want all people to do this? Yes. But.

Has a line been crossed when the stories and symbols of the scriptural tradition are “raided” more than read? Has this happened in Lewis’ case? I don’t know, but when I look at the broader phenomenon of the way that Christian symbols and rituals are used by the sports-entertainment empire, it seems clear to me that there is a lot of that going on.

I am especially wary of the way that professional sports uses Christian Scripture and tradition because the narrative of sports is, by definition, winner versus loser, and with a great deal of money at stake. When you start to attach Christian symbols to a system that is by definition winner versus loser with a great deal of

⁸Les Carpenter, “Ray Lewis’ open expression of faith unifies Ravens,” *Yahoo Sports*, January 25, 2013, <http://sports.yahoo.com/news/nfl—ray-lewis—open-expression-of-faith-unifies-ravens-160334503.html> (accessed July 6, 2015).

⁹Tim Schenck, “The Theology of Ray Lewis,” *The Huffington Post*, February 4, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rev-tim-schenck/the-theology-of-ray-lewis_b_2617107.html (accessed July 6, 2015).

money at stake, I wonder if what Paul called “the foolishness of our proclamation” is being subsumed and co-opted by the greed of the sports empire.

But what is to be done? What is the church to do when the polemical object of the church’s conversation (in this case the athletic-entertainment empire) is already using the church’s own stories, words, and symbols...and using them more effectively than the church?

In such a case, the church must keep on speaking the Word that gives us life—Jesus Christ, and him crucified and raised. The church must keep on preaching the one and only gospel and trust that the new wine of the gospel cannot be contained in any old wineskins; the new wine will work and work—and eventually, it will break free.

But beware of the wolves in sheep’s clothing. When sporting figures speak the words of Scripture, it may or may not be the actual gospel. The empire will use our stories and words to its ends if it can. But listen carefully. It may be that the hands are the hands of Esau, but the voice is the voice of Jacob.

So with these two rather discouraging words from the Bible regarding sport fandom, might an encouraging word be brought to bear? Why yes. Many, in fact; but to bring this essay around the bases within the ordained word limit, I will offer only one: Don’t miss the wonder!

SPORTS: DON’T MISS THE WONDER!

When I publicly confirmed my Christian faith at the age of fifteen, my godparents gave me a shiny, new study Bible, with the following inscription:

Three things are too wonderful for me,
and a fourth I do not understand:
the way of an eagle in the sky,
the way of a snake on a rock,
the way of a ship on the sea,
and the way of a man with a maiden. (Prov 30:18–19 NIV)
“Don’t miss the wonder!”

Those last four words, added by my godfather, have stayed with me. What a gentle sell on a “way” of seeing life with biblically tuned eyes. Don’t miss the wonder! Not, “narrow is the way, straight is the path.” But, a way of looking at life: Don’t miss the wonder! Not, “Blessed is the one who does not walk in the way of sinners.” But a way of looking up at the soaring eagle, down at the sunning snake, out at the sailing ship, and in at the emotions of romance and love. Don’t miss the wonder!

The wonder of sports

Sports, from the perspective of a fan, are all about wonder. Sports are the original, the greatest, and still the reigning champion of “reality entertainment.” You never know what is going to happen. And so very often, it is, in the words of Proverbs, “too wonderful” to behold. The greatest sporting moments hap-

pen in an instant, then live on in memory, in hearty debate, and now in digital imagery.

Sports are about human achievement, about justice and injustice, about the beauty of humans creating and tweaking these quirky games that are so, well, wonderful.

A comment on that word “wonderful,” in Prov 30:18: the Hebrew root (פלא) is the word that so often is used in the Old Testament to describe the amazing grace of God’s merciful intrusions into the chaos of matter, material, and history to create wonders:

- the wonder of creation itself (“Stop and consider the wondrous works of God” Job 37:14)
- the wonder of human life itself (“I am fearfully and wonderfully made” Ps 139:14)
- the wonder of a long-promised, miraculous birth to an old woman (“Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?” Gen 18:14)
- the wonders of God’s election and guidance of Israel through history (“Remember the wonderful works he has done” Ps 105:5)
- the wonderful work of God’s law (“Open my eyes, so that I may behold wondrous things out of your law” Ps 119:18)
- the wonderful, unique experiences of love and deliverance individual people experience (“he has wondrously shown his steadfast love to me” Ps 31:21).

The point of Prov 30:18–19 is that the same type of “wonders” that God has enacted through the act of creation and through God’s many acts of deliverance within history are also available every day, right in front of our eyes—if we have eyes to see. And to my eyes, I see such wonders in sports. As “created co-creators,” human beings make many wonderful things: art, architecture, music, love, story, sport. We make the rules, we devise strategies, we improvise, we achieve. It is wonderful.

The wonder of sports and social change

Another wonderful thing about sports is that sports can lead social change. Ideally (which means rarely), sports can be rather objective—it is about achievement, pure and simple. Who is the faster runner? She wins. Who is the better hitter? Put him in the game.

At the 1936 Summer Olympics, Jesse Owens—that beautiful, black track-and-field athlete—put a frown on Hitler’s face and put the lie to the National Socialist racist teaching of Aryan superiority. In 1938, boxer Joe Louis gave the teaching a further battering in two minutes and four seconds in front of 70,000 people at Yankee Stadium. A few years later, the intelligence and skill with which Jackie Robinson adorned the baseball diamond forced another racist barrier to fall. More recently, it seems to me that the openness with which prominent lesbian athletes have been embraced by teammates and competitors (in individual sports) certainly helped speed acceptance of gay and lesbian people. At the very moment

when I am writing this essay, the public outcry over several NFL players committing crimes of domestic abuse may be helping our society stare down this ugly sin. The ability of sports to lead social change is a wonderful thing.

The wonder of sports and critical thinking

Another thing is wonderful about being a fan of sports: critical thinking. My eleven-year-old son Gunnar—who gave me permission to write about him for this essay—shares my love of sports. Unlike his sister, who devours books the way the Purple People Eaters once ate up quarterbacks, Gunnar was slow to read. He simply had no desire to read. Until he discovered sports. And then he began to read, to think critically, to hunger for information.

sports are about human achievement, about justice and injustice, about the beauty of humans creating and tweaking these quirky games that are so, well, wonderful

Watching sports with me, as a young child, Gunnar started to ask questions about the game. Why is he out? Does that run count? Why not? What is a put out? What is a force out? What is being tagged out? How is that different than tagging up? How do you compute batting average? (An aside: a friend whose successful career included leading social-purpose investing for a Christian organization told me that he first became interested in statistics by following baseball as a boy.)

The phenomenon of sports has been a gateway drug for my son to become a critical thinker. It opened up his world.

And is anything more wonderful than seeing your child come alive? ⊕

ROLF JACOBSON, a long-suffering Vikings fan and professor of Old Testament at Luther Seminary, Saint Paul, Minnesota, is a frequent contributor to Word & World. His latest book is a commentary: The Book of Psalms, coauthored with Nancy deClaisse-Walford and Beth Tanner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014). He appears weekly on two preaching podcasts: “Sermon Brainwave” and “I Love to Tell the Story (The Narrative Lectionary).”