



## Toward Narrowing the Gulf between Sport and Religion

SHIRL JAMES HOFFMAN

Two years ago, the president of a small southern college ordered a failing grade to be stricken from the transcript of the school's basketball star, thereby enabling the player to continue playing on the team. The school eventually won that year's national championship. Given bold coverage in the international sports pages, on radio, and TV, the incident ultimately led to public protests on campus, the board of trustees' dismissal of two presidential assistants who criticized their boss's actions, and ultimately to the firing of the president himself. The curiosity of the press was piqued, not so much because a school conspired to skirt the rules in order to ensure a winning season for its basketball team—skulduggery by universities in the pursuit of national recognition for their athletic teams has become something of a cottage industry these days—but because the act stood in sharp contrast to the values the school claimed to believe and teach. The school in question advertises itself as a Christian college, the president was an ordained minister for whom the school's graduate divinity school is named, the tournament the team won (thanks to the altered transcript) was the National *Christian* College Athletic Association championship, and the failing grade in question had been earned in a religion class.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>See the report online: <http://www.cnn.com/2002/EDUCATION/10/11/grade.tampering.ap/> [cited 12 May 2003].

*Sports, as experienced in modern culture and all too often embraced by the church, is void of spiritual nutrition. Yet, sports first emerged in human culture as cultic rituals. Might the church help transform sports fields into places where we imitate the Logos by rehearsing and enacting spiritual truths?*

This is the tragic stuff of which great comedy is made—a colossal juxtaposition of values and actions coupled with an almost too-crass-to-believe-it hypocrisy that virtually guaranteed roars of laughter in bars and sports newsrooms and other venues where sports fans share notes on the happenings of the day. But for those invested in the institution it was a tragic and flawed act by a good man who apparently took stock of the ethical parameters of the situation and decided that, in the end, victory in the athletic arena would better serve the greater good than would leaving the failing grade intact. For the Christian community it was another in a long line of nationally publicized embarrassments that form grist for the mills of its greatest critics.

Those who have lived through the Jim and Tammy Faye debacle, the Jimmy Swaggart humiliation, and other scandals spreading hypocrisy across the face of modern-day religion might shrug this off as simply more of the same, but I think this case is different. The act was not committed, as so often religious scandals are, as a way of lining the pockets of a charismatic leader to abet a profligate lifestyle, indulge a salacious urge, or to ensure a larger share of the television audience. In this case deceit grew out of something much more mundane and, on its face, more honorable: a simple desire to field a championship basketball team and thereby win a bit of recognition for a college. The disgrace was wrought, not by perverting something serious, but by perverting what some would consider among the most trivial of human pursuits: sports. That an esteemed man and a fine college would risk its reputation on the chance to secure success for sports may tell us less about human frailty in the spiritual arena than it tells us about the difficulty the Christian community has in understanding sport and appreciating its proper place in the life of believers.

---

*“as a form of entertainment for the adult masses, sport  
knows few rivals”*

---

#### SPORTS IN AMERICAN CULTURE

If the Christian community misunderstands sport and its role in society—and I believe it does—it is not a misunderstanding born of unfamiliarity. Sports are pervasive. For millions of youngsters, sports are rites of passage, regarded by parents as important rituals for teaching lessons in discipline, hard work, persistence, and teamwork. As youth sports leagues have expanded, it is not uncommon for parents of athletically gifted children to spend entire weekends traveling to games, watching and perhaps coaching their kids at various athletic venues.

As a form of entertainment for the adult masses, sport knows few rivals. A few years ago the conductor of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, Mariss Jansons, looked out his apartment window at the construction sites for two new publicly financed sports stadiums in his neighborhood. “Tell me please,” he asked a reporter. “Everyone speaks about [the] Steelers. When you see [the] Steelers play [the]

whole city is crazy....Even people who don't like them pay attention. But it is not [like that] with us, the orchestra."<sup>2</sup> Pittsburgh is a big sports town, no doubt about it, but its love of sports reflects a national, not a regional phenomenon. The ancient Romans, usually cited as an example of how sports-crazed a culture could become, were fuzzy-cheeked tenderfoots compared to hard-core sports fanatics of the twenty-first century. On a typical fall weekend during the 2000 season over 2.5 million fans watched a sports event in person. This did not include, of course, the tens of millions who, with backsides glued to the sofa, gorged themselves on televised sports, slickly designed and packaged by television producers and gushed over by talkative broadcasters.<sup>3</sup>

Americans not only like to play and watch sports, they like to read about them as well. Think about this: *Sports Illustrated* sells as many copies in a month (13.2 million) as *To Kill a Mockingbird* has sold since its first publication. When a society's national newspaper (*USA Today*) allocates approximately one-fourth of its pages to sports; when the *World Almanac* devotes one-tenth of its pages to sports (more than allocated for business, science, or politics combined); when a new American history text for fifth graders treats the Depression and the presidency of Franklin Roosevelt in thirty-three lines, but devotes two pages to baseball star Cal Ripken Jr., it is fair to say that sport has a firm grip on our society.<sup>4</sup>

#### SPORTS AND CHURCH

Caught up in this national sports craze, if not actually filling its sails, is a large segment of the Christian community. I know of no statistical breakdowns of the religious orientations of those who watched the most recent Super Bowl, but no doubt many had attended church that Sunday morning. In fact, it would not have been all that unusual for their church to have designated it "Super Bowl Sunday" or to have marked the day by scheduling the evening service a few hours earlier to give congregants a chance to settle in to watch the 6:30 P.M. kickoff. Perhaps some were members of congregations who opted for more creative approaches, like that taken by a Maryland church. Troubled by a sizeable dip in the Sunday evening service on Super Bowl Sunday, the church has instituted the custom of replacing the pulpit with a large-screen television so the congregation can watch the game together while sharing a potluck supper. Thankfully, the minister was able to squeeze in a mini-sermon before game time. It was not all that many years ago that Sunday baseball was banned lest it interfere with morning worship; now, as writer Frank Deford has noted: "Sport owns Sunday now, and religion is content to lease a few minutes before the big games."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Caroline Abels, "Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra Conductor continues to pursue perfection," *Pittsburgh Post Gazette*, 7 May 2000, G13.

<sup>3</sup>Steve Rushin, "Steve Rushin's Air and Space," *Sports Illustrated*, 4 December 2000, 21.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Frank Deford, "Religion in Sport," *Sports Illustrated*, 19 April 1976, 26

As the lead-in story to this article illustrates, sports have become central to the missions of Christian colleges throughout the land. One hears much about Jerry Falwell's Liberty University these days, not so much for its academic vision or its service-learning outreach programs, but for its football, basketball, and baseball teams, some of them coached by former professional players. Like evangelist Oral Roberts, whose Tulsa university was the first Christian school to move its athletics programs onto the big-time sports stage over three decades ago, Falwell's vision is to put his school on the map "for Christ" by fielding a football team that can knock off those theologically misguided folks from Notre Dame.

In my travels to speak to faculty and student bodies at such schools, I have been amazed at the currency given to interscholastic athletics. Even at some of the smallest Christian liberal arts colleges, recruiting athletes—and especially football players—has become a sure-fire way of bolstering declining enrollments. Their "view books" and advertisements leave no doubt about the importance of athletics on their campuses. A few years ago a small Christian college that had recently hired a former Chicago Bears player to coach its football team, opted to highlight its athletic programs (and completely ignore its academic programs) with this catchy ad in *Christianity Today*: "If you're in high school and want to play for a pro in college, call Trinity College."<sup>6</sup>

---

*"deep in the bowels of the stadium, out of sight and sound of the  
braying crowds, a special religion is at work"*

---

The most concentrated, but least visible, mix of sport with contemporary Christianity is found in the evangelistic and ministerial enterprises of a growing numbers of "sport-faith organizations." Deep in the bowels of the stadium, out of sight and sound of the braying crowds, a special religion is at work, not only quelling anxiety in the gut-wrenching moments before the big game, but helping athletes as they try to fuse a gospel of peace and humility to an ethos of dominance and self-interest. I refer not to the familiar pregame recitations of the Lord's Prayer, often enforced by a coach and offered by players who have little time or interest in religion, nor to the after-touchdown genuflections with finger pointed skyward to thank God for the assist, but to the serious work of a burgeoning sports-faith complex operating in sports at all levels, from high schools to the pros.

Most visible are the Fellowship of Christian Athletes and Athletes in Action (sponsored by Campus Crusade for Christ), both large and influential organizations, but only the tip of the sports-faith iceberg. Pro Sports Outreach ministers exclusively to professional athletes. Sports Ambassadors uses sport as an instrument of international evangelism. Baseball Chapel, Inc., holds pregame chapel services in the locker rooms of virtually all major league baseball teams. Motor Racing Out-

<sup>6</sup>Tony Ladd and James Mathisen, *Muscular Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1999) 183.

reach ministers to NASCAR drivers, offering personal counseling and prerace worship services, reportedly to a majority of the racers who, in the following hours, will deliberately risk life and limb for the amusement of a frenzied and largely inebriated crowd. There are sports-faith organizations for fishermen (Fellowship of Christian Anglers), motorcyclists (Christian Motorcyclist Association), even horse racing (The Race Track Chaplaincy of America). Never has so much evangelical ammunition been fired by so many at so few.

None of this reflects the inroads sport has made in the life of the local church. After several centuries of exclusion, the doors to the playground were pried open in the late nineteenth century during the early years of the Social Gospel movement, but only after much soul-searching and worry about the overpowering appeal to laypeople. Now, sports are a familiar entry on the church calendar, one of a host of secular methods used to attract members. Sociologist Charles Page identified the trend, which has elsewhere been termed the “basketballization” of the churches, over a half century ago.<sup>7</sup> In church-subsidized athletic complexes—some more elaborate than such facilities at small colleges—congregants, both old and young, compete, often under the supervision of full-time church staff, in elaborate athletic facilities. The larger the church, the more sizeable the investment the congregation is likely to have made in sports programming. A recent survey showed that the five largest churches in the Memphis metropolitan area spent a combined total of sixteen million dollars on sport and recreation facilities between 1988 and 1997.<sup>8</sup> Your church may not have a three-court gymnasium, bowling alleys in the basement, or a plush fitness facility where women do aerobics to the cadence of “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” but it can go head to head with Methodists and Baptists and Catholics in local church softball or basketball leagues. Even though the stakes are small—bragging rights and perhaps an intimation that one’s theological position was right all along—these competitions can be as fierce (and often as ugly) as big-time sports.

Actually, this mixing of sport and religion is not all that surprising, given that sports first appeared in culture as cultic rituals. Competitive contests took the form of liturgical acts for ensuring rain or a good harvest or acting out dramatic interplay between the forces of good and evil. Anyone who has visited the vast temple ballcourt complex of Mexico’s Chichen Itza and studied the ball games played there can appreciate how splendidly the Mayans integrated sports competition with their cosmology, even to the point of ritually sacrificing a team member following the competition.<sup>9</sup> These early Mayans, like ancient Greek sprinters, Egyp-

<sup>7</sup>Charles Page, “Bureaucracy and the Liberal Church,” *The Review of Religion* 16/3-4 (March 1952) 147-148; the term “basketballization” is used by Elizabeth Nottingham, *Religion and Society* (New York: Random House, 1954) 78.

<sup>8</sup>Robert Pitter and Andriel Stockel, “Exploring the Growth of Church-Based Sport in Memphis, Tennessee” (paper presented at the annual meeting of the North American Society for the Sociology of Sport, Toronto, Ontario; November 6, 1997).

<sup>9</sup>Vernon L. Scarborough and David Wiley, eds., *The Mesoamerican Ballgame* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1991).

tian ball players, and American Indian stickball players, regarded competitive games as depictions and celebrations of ultimate realities. From a historical perspective, says Richard Mandell, sport is fundamentally a religious gesture: “We may be making artificial separations if we remove sport very far from ritual, the dance, and the theater.”<sup>10</sup> I have often wondered if archeologists of the twenty-sixth century, upon discovering ruins of modern church-sport complexes, might conclude that the twenty-first-century churches of America, like the ancient Mayans, had achieved some thoroughgoing integration of religious belief and sport practice.

### CAN SPORTS BE REDEEMED?

If so, they would be wrong. Sports, at least since the Protestant Reformation, have been thoroughly secularized, valued by the church only for their instrumental value, but far too trivial to be of spiritual consequence. Whether this owes to some Reformational vestige of play-hating or is simply one of many signs of secularization is difficult to say. Religion scholar Lonnie Kliever believes it is the latter, noting that “religion has lost its control over play in the same way and for the same reasons that it has lost its control over the sciences and the arts, over politics and economics, over health care and social welfare. Like these other segmented areas of human life, play operates under its own rules and pursues its own ends.”<sup>11</sup>

The gulf in our minds separating sport from religion is enormous. We locate each in compartments of our human experiences so distant from each other that it strains our imaginations to believe that sports might be capable of embodying the symbols and signs that lie at the heart of our religious beliefs. Some years ago I participated in a week-long symposium, sponsored by a Midwestern Christian college, where relationships between sports, liberal education, and Christianity were debated. One of the speakers, a well-published historian and avid supporter of college athletics, praised sports as deserving a central experience in the life of the institution, yet urged that students and faculty take them with a sense of proportion. “Games,” he told us, “are things of the body, and thus of a lower importance than things of the spirit.”<sup>12</sup>

The good professor was not suggesting that sports lack appeal to our emotions. He merely was attempting to put sport in its place, to position it in the broad sphere of human and heavenly experiences. In his view, as in so many Christians’ views, its place lies far outside our spiritual zones. I think he was dead wrong. Surely playing sports involves our bodies—often in some pretty amazing ways—but then, so does piano playing, or sculpture, or dance. But physical fitness and exercise are no more the reason we play sports than nutrition is the reason we visit

<sup>10</sup>Richard D. Mandell, *Sport: A Cultural History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984) 5.

<sup>11</sup>Lonnie Kliever, “God and Games in Modern Culture,” in *From Season to Season*, ed. Joseph Price (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2001) 43.

<sup>12</sup>John Wilson, “Dilemmas of the College Athlete,” *Imprimis* 16 (1987) 3. (*Imprimis* is the monthly journal of Hillsdale College, Hillsdale, MI.)

three-star restaurants. It is the human experience of playing and watching that lies behind our addictions, experiences so deep and moving that some (quite erroneously to my way of thinking) have called them religions.<sup>13</sup> Not to recognize their powers is to shield one's eyes, not only from sport's dangers, but from its promises as well.

---

***“many of our modern sport spectacles are void of spiritual nutrition; they are junk food for the human spirit that fattens the public’s belly while clogging its moral arteries”***

---

What the ancients knew and we seem to have forgotten is that sports function, as Bart Giamatti suggested, “expansively and powerfully as part of our artistic and imaginative impulse.”<sup>14</sup> Whether we care to notice or not, our sports inevitably project something of our visions of ultimate reality, revealing our Edenic visions of ourselves as, Giamatti said, “better than we are, back to where we were.” I suppose if one takes, as his or her normative model of sport, the popular mega-spectacles of our day fueled by crass commercial interests, shaped wholly by popular taste, and imbued with an unrestrained sensationalism, one might be justified in concluding that sport lacks the potential for being religiously significant, at least in a way that would be meaningful to Christians. I would be the first to admit that many, if not most, of our modern sport spectacles, along with many of the lower tiers of sport competitions that mimic them, shape our sights and insights in ways that are void of spiritual nutrition. Far from nourishing, they are junk food for the human spirit that fattens the public's belly while clogging its moral arteries.

But sport, like art, has many forms. It can be arranged to appeal to a wild assortment of strata in the subterranean reaches of our moral landscapes. Like art, it can have a materialistic slant, a hedonistic slant, or a slant that ennobles and uplifts and makes contact with our spiritual sensibilities. Popular taste, shaped by the public's fascination with violence, aggression, rivalry, and unrestrained competitiveness dictates the popular formats of our sporting venues, from Yankee Stadium to the church softball field. Sport tailored to mass appeal led to the enormous gulf that exists between the images projected by the last Super Bowl telecast and those that might express the hallmarks of the Christian faith. Washington Gladden, the great leader of the Social Gospel movement, predicted this turn of events in 1885, when he warned his church: “When the commercial law of supply and demand is allowed to govern sports the sole purveyors of sport become those whose interest is financial. What sells soon defines community moral standards and the trend is inevitably downward.”<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup>Charles Prebish, *Religion and Sport: The Meeting of the Sacred and the Profane* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1993).

<sup>14</sup>Bartlett Giamatti, *Take Time For Paradise: Americans and Their Games* (New York: Summit, 1989) 38.

<sup>15</sup>Washington Gladden, “Christianity and Popular Amusements,” *Century Magazine* 29 (1885) 389.

In all of this, many churches have not remained neutral; their lot has been cast with big-time sport, celebrating it, emulating it, and fawning over it, happy to bask in its reflected image. Above all, they are bent on using it. When sport is reduced to a mere handmaiden of evangelism it is virtually guaranteed that its promoters will look past the symbols and messages embodied in the instrument itself. How else to explain the emergence in recent years of Christian professional wrestling? Its minister-promoters, ever conscious of the need to eliminate the foul language and scantily-clad round-announcers, seem oblivious to the story lines and visions inspired by the competition itself.<sup>16</sup>

Thus it is that sports played in Christian precincts—except perhaps for an obligatory pregame prayer—do not look all that different from sports played in the broader reaches of society. The images projected and the worldviews celebrated look pretty much the same. 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. Such observations have been confirmed in my own experience. In the nineteenth century when ministers at the front of the Social Gospel movement earnestly struggled to discern the proper place of sports in the life of the church, initially they were guided by Gladden’s admonition to “enter into sports, pervade them, and transform them.”<sup>17</sup> From where I have been viewing the action, there is no doubt that the churches have entered sports, and pervaded, but I have not as yet seen any willingness to transform them. Without the transformation, one wonders what they are doing there at all.

---

*“thinking of sport as a human experience for instilling and expressing the signals of the faith is difficult for those more accustomed to viewing sports as a time for abandoning restraints and letting down one’s hair”*

---

Thinking of sport as a human experience for instilling and expressing the signals of the faith is difficult for those more accustomed to viewing sports as a time for abandoning restraints and letting down one’s hair. Ronald Reagan seemed to have this in mind when he told a college football team that they “can feel a clean hatred [for their opponent] because it’s only symbolic in a jersey.”<sup>18</sup> Actually, Reagan’s view is not all that different from the prevailing view of many Christians. No less than the esteemed church historian Mark Noll ventured into these same waters by suggesting that after watching the Rose Bowl he wondered if “there is a certain surfeit of human emotion that, thanks to the Fall, refuses to focus on God and so is better spent on football than on ideological or personal strife.”<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup>“Wrestlers Entertain for Jesus,” *Greensboro News and Record*, 18 April 2001, B7.

<sup>17</sup>Gladden, “Christianity and Popular Amusements.”

<sup>18</sup>Brenda Jo Bredemeier and David L. Shields, “Values and Violence in Sports,” *Psychology Today*, October 1985, 23.

<sup>19</sup>Mark Noll, “A Rose by Any Other Name,” *The Reformed Journal*, January 1986, 3.



There is in Noll's comment a sense of inevitability, as if there really is no alternative to sports as arranged and promoted in modern society. I think the church, rather than scratching for ways to harmonize its message with the present state of affairs, needs to roll up its sleeves and change sport, at least change sport that proceeds under its auspices. I am nearing the end of a career in which I devoted over forty years to a profession inextricably tied to the field of sports. Sadly, I am dismayed with the face of sports in America—and especially dismayed with the church's misunderstanding and misappropriation of them. Yet, I remain convinced that sports can be reclaimed for higher purposes than merely letting off the steam of pent-up sin. Properly organized and played, they can amplify our understanding of ourselves as God's children in a genuine faith-revelation experience. Moreover, they can help us understand what the church fathers understood so clearly: that play is an expression of both body and soul; that in play we become imitators of the Logos, the "Heavenly Wisdom who plays upon the earth, co-fashioner with God."<sup>20</sup> But this will require the church to approach sports with loftier views, expecting sport fields to be places where we imitate the Logos by rehearsing and enacting spiritual truths until they are played into our bodies of which they are a part. Having this single, very specific expectation for sports, especially sport appropriated by the church for its own uses, will go a long way toward helping us bring them into line with our beliefs and spiritual aspirations. ⊕

*SHIRL JAMES HOFFMAN has been a physical education teacher, coach, and administrator, and currently is professor of exercise and sport science at University of North Carolina at Greensboro. He is the editor of Sport and Religion (Human Kinetics, 1990) and is working on a book on sport and evangelicalism in America.*

<sup>20</sup>Hugo Rahner, *Man at Play* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972) 33.