



Feeling God's Pleasure: Christian Faith in the World of Sports

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THE THEOLOGICAL TRANSFORMATION OF A TEAM

In a remote village in the Ethiopian countryside, there lies a newly dug well with a strange inscription: "Faith. Family. Future. Football." The inscription is strange not simply because, to Ethiopians, "football" means kicking a round ball rather than throwing an oblong one. Nor is it particularly strange to find some of those four words associated with each other, either in Ethiopia or America. What's strange is that the inscription reflects the priorities of the men who put it there: faith first, then your family, then your future, and only *then* football. After all, these men came to Ethiopia from the world of American football, where Christians routinely skip church to attend tailgates for NFL games.

But these men don't come from the NFL, or at least not yet. They were members of David Cutcliffe's Duke University football program, and that inscription is their motto. David Harding, a committed Christian and one of the team's starting offensive linemen, took the motto especially to heart. He had grown up going on mission trips with his family, so the idea of serving in Ethiopia was nothing new for him. What was new, though, was trying to convince his teammates along the offensive line to go with him. Initially, he wasn't sure if any of them would even be inter-

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ested. But when he pitched the idea, almost every one of them signed up. They all had a hunger to grow closer together through service, and in May 2012 they spent two weeks in Ethiopia building wells so that the village there could have a steady supply of clean running water.

The Ethiopia trip marked a midpoint in the transformation of the Duke football program. Five years earlier, just before Cutcliffe took over the program, Duke University successfully defended itself against a lawsuit by arguing that it possessed the nation's worst football team. Duke had backed out of a future game with Louisville, and Louisville argued that it couldn't find a replacement of similar stature. Duke's response: "Literally anyone else would be better." Duke won the case in large part because of its previous achievements in futility: the prior decade alone included four winless seasons, two of the longest losing streaks in college football history and an overall record of 18–106. When Cutcliffe got a first look at his new players in 2008, he offered this sobering evaluation: "That's the fattest, slowest football team I've ever seen in my life."¹

Now jump to the 2012 season, when Harding and his offensive line cohorts returned from Ethiopia and set their sights on Duke's first bowl game in decades. Sitting at 5–2 and one win away from that elusive bowl eligibility, Duke hosted its archrival University of North Carolina (UNC). UNC had won 21 of the previous 22 games in the rivalry, so most people expected more of the same. Harding and the rest of Duke's offensive line, however, did not. They came out of the tunnel and manhandled the UNC defense, carving up holes for Duke's running backs to gain 234 yards on the ground and allowing Duke's quarterback Sean Renfree to throw for almost 300 yards in the air. Duke won a 33–30 thriller and finally booked its ticket to a bowl game.

Duke would lose its remaining games that season, however, finishing at an improved but frustrating mark of 6–7. The bowl game had finally arrived, but a loss left Harding and his teammates wanting more. The following season, Harding's senior year, Duke won a program-record ten games, the ACC Coastal Division Championship, and nearly beat Johnny Manziel's Texas A&M team on New Year's Eve in one of the highest-rated bowl games in college football history. On senior night that year, in a pivotal tilt against Miami (yes, Miami), Harding and company opened up space for Duke's rushers to amass an astonishing 358 yards en route to a 48–30 victory.

It was one of the great stories in sports that year, and I was privileged to witness it up close and personal. While studying theology at Duke from 2008 to the present, I have served as an equipment manager for the Duke football program. Now, I want to offer a theological description of that program's transformation, gleaned from years of observing God's presence there.

¹Daniel Carp, "David Cutcliffe and Kevin White reunited by 'perfect storm,'" *The Chronicle*, December 5, 2013; <http://www.dukechronicle.com/articles/2013/12/06/david-cutcliffe-and-kevin-white-reunited-perfect-storm#.VZfxExNVikp> (accessed July 4, 2015).

What happens to a team when its players subordinate the sport itself to their faith, their families, and their futures? The whole culture changes. When I started managing in 2008, players would often take plays off, complain, and lose focus. Some of their habits were just plain terrible. So Cutcliffe would start preaching from Aristotle: “You are what you repeatedly do!” Practice doesn’t make perfect, he would say, “Practice makes *permanent*.” Prayer started popping up on and off the field. Laziness, cheating, and bad grades were not tolerated, and some very talented players were dismissed on those grounds.

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With time, new habits started to emerge. Players started paying close attention to detail, staying focused throughout practice, and working as hard in the classroom as on the football field. They started committing their spare time to community service projects, and new leaders like Harding began to take ownership of the team. But without any doubt, the most remarkable cultural shift that occurred was the formation of a new kind of community. They called it “DukeGang,” but instead of their gang unifying around drugs and violence, they unified around their faith, their families, their futures, and, of course, their football.

And their football started becoming really, really enjoyable. Like Eric Liddell in the movie *Chariots of Fire*, you could sense that when these guys played, they felt God’s pleasure. They knew and loved each other, and it gave each individual great joy to sacrifice his blood, sweat, and tears for the sake of his teammates next to him. It was, in certain ways, what Paul wants the church to be: a united body made up of many members, who say to each other, “I need you.”

But this “theology of the team” goes deeper. In any given play, you have a variety of distinct persons cooperating to execute together. For example, you might have Harding blocking in tandem with Laken Tomlinson, another offensive lineman who went on the Ethiopia trip. Harding was an undersized white guy from Florida who relied on technique and positional awareness; Tomlinson was a mammoth Jamaican immigrant from Chicago whose size and strength overwhelmed opponents. When they would go block together, the unity of the movement would depend on their intimate knowledge of each other *as distinct persons*. Laken needs to know Dave’s particular tendencies and vice versa. This sort of interpersonal communication and awareness is what church fathers like Maximus meant by the term *perichoresis*. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit remain distinct persons, yet their relationship with each other enables a deep bond of love that enriches the life of each person. Indeed, because of the bonds they shared together, each person along that Duke offensive line grew in remarkable ways. When Tomlinson was recently drafted in the first round of the 2015 NFL Draft, the interviewer asked him

why he wanted to go to medical school when he finishes his football career, and he responded: “I chose medicine because my grandpa passed away my sophomore year of high school. He was on vacation in Jamaica and the hospital couldn’t help him when he was sick. That angered me and I wanted to change that. My goal in life is to one day go back to Jamaica and change the healthcare system there, to improve it.”²

AMERICA’S “ERSATZ RELIGION”

If every athlete had the character of Laken Tomlinson and David Harding, Christians could support the athletic industry with a clearer conscience. But it takes only a quick survey of recent events in sports to nauseate anyone with a moral compass. In the last decade alone, we have seen major academic and financial scandals at the NCAA’s flagship athletic programs; repeated cases of domestic abuse in the NFL and NBA; revelations about the widespread use of performance-enhancing drugs across all sports; the sexual exploits of Tiger Woods, Brett Favre, and Rick Pitino (to name but a few); blatant spying on opposing teams, and, to top it all off, referees gambling on games they were refereeing.

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Sports journalists have already spilled much ink trying to diagnose these problems and offer solutions. “We need to keep the big corporations away from young athletes,” they say, or “We need more academic oversight”; “We need better domestic abuse training programs,” and “We ought to just go ahead and pay college athletes.” To be sure, each of those proposals could do some good. But none of them cuts quite deep enough. Only a voice from outside of sports could cut deep enough to diagnose the true source of these problems.

In his stunning book *A Secular Age*, the Catholic philosopher Charles Taylor notices that in the modern Western world, things like sporting events and rock concerts function in a peculiar way:

The meaning of our participation in the event is shaped by the whole vast dispersed audience we share it with. Just because these spaces hover between solitude and togetherness, they may sometimes flip over into common action; and indeed, the moment when they do so may be hard to pin-point. As we rise as one to cheer the crucial third-period goal, we have undoubtedly become a common agent; and we may try to prolong this when we leave the stadium by marching and chanting, or even wreaking various forms of mayhem together. The cheering crowd at a rock festival is similarly fused. There is a heightened excitement at these moments of fusion, reminiscent of Carnival, or of some of the great collective rituals of earlier days. Durkheim gave an important place to

²This quote is from an ESPN interview. A video of that interview can be seen here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sUByVISSzrY> (accessed July 4, 2015)

these times of collective effervescence as founding moments of society and the sacred. In any case, these moments seem to respond to some important felt need of today's "lonely crowd."³

The lone individual can have his or her identity taken up into a collective body of shared interest. They all can now think together, cheer together, even *feel* together:

What is happening is that we are all being touched together, moved as one, sensing ourselves as fused in our contact with something greater, deeply moving, or admirable; whose power to move us has been immensely magnified by the fusion.⁴

The theological language now reaches a fever pitch, where we can hear medieval resonances of religious festivity:

This brings us back into the category of the "festive," which I invoked above: moments of fusion in a common action/feeling, which both wrench us out of the everyday, and seem to put us in touch with something exceptional, beyond ourselves. Which is why some have seen these moments as among the new forms of religion in our world.⁵

Sports, according to Taylor, have become a kind of "ersatz religion." We build expensive new "cathedrals" to house our worship of athletic prowess. We sacrifice time, energy, attention, and tons of money to the altar of our favorite teams and players. We sometimes even deify players and coaches; Argentinian fans debate whether Diego Maradona or Lionel Messi is the true "God of futbol." And make no mistake: ESPN is more than happy to help you "play" without ceasing. On May 2, 2015, ESPN ran an article with the title: "Your Game Plan for an Epic Saturday of TV Sports."⁶ Between the NFL Draft, the Kentucky Derby, the NBA and NHL Playoffs, and the Mayweather vs. Pacquiao boxing match, ESPN assured the reader that, with proper preparation, he or she would never need to get up off the couch:

There are a few essential things you will need this Saturday to survive The Greatest Sports TV Day in History. Extra batteries for your remote are important, sure. A backup generator for your minifridge and flat-screen TV is a must. Eye drops? Check. Lumbar support pillow? Check. Caffeine? Check. Your lucky sweatpants? Check. A loving and understanding spouse? Double check. And, of course, buckets and buckets of salsa. Check.⁷

The jesting tone might be funny if the reality weren't so serious. After all, ESPN makes a fortune off of this exact type of behavior: passive, consumptive

³Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge and London: Belknap Press, 2007) 482.

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵*Ibid.*, 482–483.

⁶David Fleming, "Your Game Plan for an Epic Saturday of TV Sports," http://espn.go.com/espn/story/_/id/12794039/your-game-plan-epic-saturday-tv-sports (accessed June 25, 2015).

⁷*Ibid.*

spectating. ESPN would rather you not plant a garden, visit a sick friend, read a book, or join a choir. From ESPN's perspective, you're doing great just sitting right there on the couch while eating chips, consuming buckets of salsa, and staying hooked up to your TV IV for hours on end. That's how it makes money, and that's one way sports become idolatrous.

Idolatry, at its core, is the act of turning something good into God. In fact, only really good things can become idols. No one turns laundry into an idol. We turn some of God's greatest gifts—sex, food, and sports—into idols because those things are capable of convincing us that they're all that really matters in life. They whisper to us: "I can satisfy you by myself. You don't need anything else, even God." So many of us go to sporting events not to learn more about the game, enjoy time with friends, or even appreciate the beauty of athleticism. We go because the "heightened excitement" at those "moments of fusion" is the closest we may get to authentic religious worship. When we no longer believe that God can "touch us together" and "move us as one," we'll find a substitute that will.

Yet idols, substitutes, and all forms of "ersatz religion" tend to promise much more than they can deliver. For example, there's the flipside to those moments of fused excitement: the collective dejection and irritability of losing fans. Fans who invest sports with religious longing tend to feel betrayed when their sports gods fail them. Indeed, some of the worst examples of sports-related violence occur after unexpected losses, like when two Los Angeles Dodgers fans beat a random San Francisco Giants fan within an inch of his life in 2011, leaving him permanently brain-damaged and paralyzed throughout his body.⁸ But even when losses don't lead to violence, they do lead to bitterness and disappointment. For every moment of "heightened excitement" and communal cheering, there will be a moment of heightened sadness and communal lament. That's no knock on sports per se; many meaningful arenas of human life involve loss and lament. But those who would invest sports with religious longing should be aware: there will *always* be losers.

Even watching your team win, though, falls short of true religion. For in that collective burst of excitement, your own individuality takes a major backseat to the anonymity of the cheering mob. Stanley Hauerwas, one of Duke's finest theologians and a Duke basketball season ticket holder, once described Duke's infamous "Cameron Crazies" as "a bunch of fascists." Having been one myself, I assure you that he's right. When you become a "Cameron Crazie," your unique, divinely created identity is subsumed into a mass of cheering support. What matters is your ability to mesh with the collective body, not any particular attributes you may possess as a person.

Contrast this phenomenon with the experience of being a member of a team. In order to achieve the unity of that Duke football team, David Harding had to remain fully himself the entire time. When he and Tomlinson would team up to exe-

⁸AP Report, "Two men get prison for Dodgers stadium Giants' fan attack," <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/two-men-plead-guilty-to-2011-beating-at-dodger-stadium/> (accessed June 25, 2015).

cute a complicated blocking scheme, each person had to know the other as a *particular* person, with a unique set of abilities and tendencies. "OK, I'm working with Dave," Tomlinson might have thought before the play began, "and Dave tends to come around to the left side of the linebackers on a play like this. I'll make sure to cover the right side so we can block both sides effectively." Or their quarterback, Anthony Boone, might notice the blocking tendencies of Dave and Laken together and choose his running path on that basis. The most successful, unified teams have always had this sort of intimate, interpersonal awareness of each individual.

The contrast is even stronger when we take it into the world of Christian worship. There the collective body certainly does act as one, but in worship of a God who knows each individual more deeply than they even know themselves. In worship, Christians can read, pray, and sing Ps 139:1–5:

O LORD, you have searched me and known me.
You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.
You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.
Even before a word is on my tongue,
O LORD, you know it completely.
You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.

DISCERNING CHRIST'S PRESENCE IN THE WORLD OF SPORTS

No sport, whether played or watched, could ever substitute for authentic worship of the true God, who knows us as individuals even as we praise him together. But as we have seen, sports can offer a powerful vehicle for the practice of the Christian faith. How, then, should Christians negotiate the tricky moral terrain of American sports?

The first thing to recognize is that the relationship between play and spectating in American sports is out of proportion. Amazement at athletic excellence should naturally lead to a desire to play and participate in it, but it seems not to be working that way. On the whole, Americans are still shockingly obese, and a main culprit is the habitual practice of gorging on food and drink while watching sports on the couch for hours on end. But in a more general sense, play is dying because spectating is killing amateurism in a variety of forms. Rather than singing or playing instruments together after dinner, the American family now watches *American Idol* and *America's Got Talent*. And rather than playing catch outside, joining a team, or training for a race, Americans now plug into ESPN.

For Christians, the stakes here are high. When Paul mentions "running the race," for example, he isn't just picking a metaphor at random. He recognizes the moral dimension of running, and connects it to the exercise of self-control:

Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it. Athletes exercise self-control

in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one. (1 Cor 9:24–25)

Notice that Paul says they exercise self-control *in all things*. Serious runners must avoid certain foods, drinks, and risky behaviors, of course, but they also must adhere to a training regimen that subordinates a whole range of other desires. If your friends are going to a concert, but the big race is coming up, you simply *must* get this run in. The serious runner may love that band, but he or she knows that, at this moment, a greater good takes priority. For Paul, self-control is not mere abstention; it's a way of discerning what to do in this time, at this place, in light of a good to be sought. The serious runner knows to eat this and not that, to push through some obstacles and yield to others, to rest the night before the race and to celebrate after. Those who seek the "imperishable wreath," then, should know when it's time to play, when it's time to watch, when it's time to work, and when it's time to worship.

So ultimately the virtue of self-control should lead to wise practical decision making, especially in the world of sports where the good, the bad, and the ugly commingle in such ambiguous ways. We need the moral resources to distinguish between, say, watching your alma mater play in the championship game among your family and friends, and watching two random teams by yourself in the middle of the season when you have an assignment due the next day. There is no strict formula for making these sorts of judgments, and most of them will be made in some grey area. But there is a term for doing this well, one that Aristotle considered the supreme virtue: practical wisdom. It is the virtue of acting rightly in particular situations, especially when those situations are murky and ambiguous.

Paul, too, believed that practical wisdom was critical to our moral life as Christians. In Phil 2:5, Paul writes: "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus." "Mind" is the traditional translation here, but the Greek *phronein* suggests something much richer. It's related to Aristotle's term for practical wisdom, *phronēsis*, and New Testament scholar Stephen Fowl suggests we translate it instead as "pattern of thinking, feeling, perceiving and acting."⁹ If we want to make wise practical decisions as Christians, if we want to know which forms of athletic activity are healthy and holy and which forms are damaging and sinful, we must adopt the *phronein* of Christ. And as Paul moves on to verses 2:6–11, we learn more about what it means for Christians to make wise practical decisions, in the world of sport and the world at large. It means imitating the active love of Christ on the cross, where he obeys the Father and wins his "imperishable wreath." For there, on the cross, we find a human body in which the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. ☩

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⁹Stephen Fowl, *Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005) 90.