

THE GOOD SPORTING LIFE

Loving and playing sport as
a follower of Jesus

STEPHEN LIGGINS

**“I’m going to order numerous copies of this book
—I loved the read.”**

— Rico Tice, All Souls Langham Place, London

**“What a great read! A marvellous model of
practical theology.”**

— Graham Daniels, Christians in Sport (UK)

“I would love a dollar for every time I’ve been asked how, as a Christian, I navigated the world of international rugby and all that goes with it. When I was selected to play for my country at the age of 21, reading a book like *The Good Sporting Life* would certainly have helped!”

— Nick Farr-Jones, former captain, Australian rugby team

THE POWER OF SPORT—to captivate the heart, inspire the imagination, and even shape nations—means we must think carefully and wisely as Christian competitors, coaches, parents, and passionate fans.

Author, pastor, long-time athlete and sports lover Stephen Liggins takes the coaching reins and trains you to glorify God in your sport.

He unpacks what the Bible has to say and gathers a wealth of practical advice and candid testimonies from believing athletes on how to live the good sporting life.

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I have very much enjoyed Stephen Liggins' insights into the sporting world, both from the amateur grassroots perspective and from the high-level professional elite sports perspective. I would love a dollar for every time I've been asked how, as a Christian, I navigated the world of international rugby and all that goes with it. When I was selected to play for my country at the age of 21, reading a book like *The Good Sporting Life* would certainly have helped!

I often think about the highs and lows that sport can deliver, and the pitfalls that can await a known sportsman strutting their stuff on the global stage. These are made so much more difficult without a deep, personal relationship with God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit to guide and provide peace and joy in all circumstances—which makes the repeated encouragement throughout this book to “Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness” one of its most helpful and important features.

Forty years after accepting the salvation that Jesus offers freely to all, I can say that my Christian relationship is the most important thing for me as I head into what is probably the final third of my life. I encourage all young sports players to learn from the wisdom found in these pages, so that they can say the same.

Nick Farr-Jones

Former captain, Australian rugby team

I'm going to order numerous copies of this book, because I stand on the touchline every week with parents who aren't near church but who love their kids, love the game, and are longing for a map with which to navigate the world of sport. I'll say to them: “This isn't really written for you, but you'd

be mad not to read it.” On page after page they’ll find a great passion for sport, some of their heroes being quoted—and the wisdom of Scripture. I loved the read and so will they.

Rico Tice

Senior Minister, All Souls Langham Place, London

What a great read! Stephen’s book is founded on a strong biblical theology with heartwarming anecdotes from Christians deeply embedded in the world of sport. This is a marvellous model of practical theology, and a work that I highly recommend.

Graham Daniels

General Director, Christians in Sport (UK)

As a first grade player, international ‘7s’ referee and elite sports chaplain, I’ve found that the hardest question for Christian sportspeople hasn’t been “How do I make that vital tackle?” or “How do I get the ball into the goal?” but “How do I survive as a Christian in the sporting world?” Stephen Liggins has written a book I have waited a lifetime for. It answers questions the Christian sports participant, coach, supporter and pastor want answered about Christianity and sport. It is a must-read.

Rev. Dr David Tyndall

International sports chaplain and founding member of Sports Chaplaincy Australia

THE GOOD SPORTING LIFE

Loving and playing
sport as a Christian

STEPHEN LIGGINS

 **matthiasmedia**
SYDNEY • YOUNGSTOWN

The Good Sporting Life

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CONTENTS

Introduction	5
1. Playing by the book	15
<i>What the Bible says about sport</i>	
2. Past and present	35
<i>The history of Christianity and sport</i>	
3. The Christian sportsperson	55
<i>Living with and for God on and off the field</i>	
4. The joy of sport	73
<i>Sport's intrinsic value</i>	
5. Sportsmanship in an unsporting world	93
<i>Sport and good character</i>	
6. The sports field as mission field	113
<i>Sport and outreach</i>	
7. Sport and support	139
<i>Sport and spiritual encouragement</i>	
8. But there's more...	155
<i>The potential benefits of good health and travel</i>	

9. The sport cycle	169
<i>Starting out, getting serious, finishing up... and beyond</i>	
10. A word for...	187
<i>parents, coaches, referees, chaplains, ministers and spectators</i>	
11. A word about...	209
<i>sport on Sundays, praying for victory, how much sport, and sports ministry</i>	
Conclusion	227
Acknowledgements	229
About the author	231

INTRODUCTION

**For everything God created is good,
and nothing is to be rejected
if it is received with thanksgiving...
(1 Timothy 4:4)**



I watched the ball climbing higher and higher into the sky. As I did so, I realized this was the sort of thing I'd want to tell my grandchildren about one day.

It was a sunny Sydney summer's afternoon, and I was playing cricket for my club side against a formidable team from another part of the city. The opposing line-up was extremely strong and boasted the twins Stephen and Mark Waugh. Steve had been a regular member of the Australian cricket team for five years, and Mark had played his first game for the national side a few weeks earlier. Both would go on to become superstars of the game. Given the quality of our opposition, the Saturday crowd was larger than usual for a Sydney first grade fixture. Most, no doubt, had come wanting to see their national heroes in action.

Mid-afternoon on the first day of the match I was (some-

what surprisingly) batting well. I had reached 45 when the opposition captain threw the ball to Steve. We'd played together in some representative sides when younger and had gotten along well, but he was highly competitive and not the sort to hand out favours to opposing batsmen! Anticipating what was to come, I was on high alert.

As Steve ran into bowl, I knew he'd try to dominate me from the start. A first-ball bouncer was high on the list of possibilities. Sure enough, that's exactly what he delivered. As the ball reared up towards my head, I moved into position for a hook shot and swung as hard as I could. As much by accident as by design, I struck the ball perfectly in the sweet spot of the bat. Time slowed down as I watched the ball going up... up... and away. It didn't just clear the fence at the edge of the field; it went 30 or 40 metres further and brought up my half century.¹

We've all had these golden moments in sport. But, to present a more complete picture, I should mention that a few minutes after hitting Steve out of the ground, he got me out. I *did* then re-turn the tables later in the day by dismissing him for next to nothing, but I have to admit that it was more a question of Steve playing a bad shot than me bowling a good ball. And then another opposition player absolutely smashed me (and everyone else) all over the park so that the other

1 To help North American readers—cricket is a little like baseball, Steve Waugh is like a top-level Major League pitcher, a bouncer is like a beanball (except that it is a legal part of the game), and hitting the ball out of the field on the full is a little like hitting a home run, except that in cricket you can hit the ball in any direction. (As a right-hander, my shot went to the left of third base.)

team finished the day on top. Within a few hours, I went from being superstar to superdud. A few days later, Steve and Mark were off to the West Indies with the Australian side, and I was catching the train into the city for another week of work. The highs and lows of sport!

That summer, our team went on to win the Sydney first grade premiership—something that ranks as one of the highlights of my sporting life. In the years that followed, two players from that team—Adam Gilchrist and Phil Emery—went on to play for Australia, and a number of others played state cricket. I played about ten seasons for the club, had a lot of fun, suffered my fair share of injuries, and made a lot of good friends. At times I found myself in discussions of a spiritual nature, and one year myself and another bloke from the club put on a midweek *Christianity Explained* course for any of our cricketing colleagues who were interested. About five guys attended. The years have rolled by, but to this day I keep in contact with many of my former teammates.

The love of sport

Like so many others, I love playing sport—the physical challenge, the mental test, the thrill of competition, the feel of performing an athletic movement well, the satisfaction of contributing to a smoothly functioning team, the break it provides from other aspects of life, and particularly the time spent with teammates and opponents. There is something about struggling with and against others in a sporting contest that is hugely bonding.

But I don't just love playing sport. I love watching it, reading about it, and talking about it. When I was a boy, I collected the autographs of sportspeople, and even constructed complex sporting encounters with my toys on the floor at home.

And I am far from alone. Sport is loved by billions of people around the world. Travel to the remotest locations on the planet and you will probably see someone wearing a Manchester United top, some kids playing with a ball, or groups of people huddled around television sets watching the football, basketball, cricket, kabaddi (look it up!), or whatever other athletic encounter you may care to mention.

While certain regions have their particular sporting emphases—just witness the American devotion to the Super Bowl—there is one game that utterly dominates the globe. By pretty much any measure, the number one sport in the world is football (soccer). Looking at this one game alone can give us a feel for the global impact of sport. More people play football than any other sport—in 2006, 265 million people were registered in clubs or leagues.² If we were to include everyone who kicks a ball in their backyard, on the street or in the local park, the number would be far, far higher. And more people watch football than any other sport.³ According to FIFA, 1.12 billion

2 'Top 10 most popular sports in the world by participation', *Pledge Sports*, June 2017: pledgesports.org/2017/06/top-10-most-popular-sports-in-the-world-by-participation/; and 'Top 10 Most Popular Participation Sports in the World' *Realbuzz.com*, 21 April 2017: realbuzz.com/articles-interests/sports-activities/article/top-10-most-popular-participation-sports-in-the-world/.

3 'Top 10 Most Watched Sports', *Pledge Sports*, March 2017: pledgesports.org/2017/03/top-10-most-watched-sports/.

viewers watched the 2018 World Cup Final.⁴

Of course, not everyone thinks that the high level of worldwide attention is good. Involvement with sport, as with so many other positive areas of life, can so easily degenerate into something negative. It is not hard to find people decrying sport's excessive and sometimes harmful influence, citing, for example, its capacity to distract people from family, work and study; divert money from more productive pursuits; damage character; destroy health; dominate the cultural landscape; and contribute to the decline of religion.⁵ While there is some truth in these concerns, it demonstrates in yet another way the global influence of sport.

Christianity and sport

As I said earlier, I love sport. But I love God, my family, and other people a whole lot more. Thanks to the grace of God, I became a Christian when I was about ten, and have thus spent most of my sporting life as a follower of Jesus. This has given me many years to reflect on how the Bible would have me interact with sport as a believer, and plenty of opportunities

4 'More than half the world watched record breaking 2018 World Cup', *FIFA.com*, 21 December 2018: fifa.com/worldcup/news/more-than-half-the-world-watched-record-breaking-2018-world-cup.

5 See, for example, Sam Duncan, 'Our obsession with sport has reached religious proportions', *The Huffington Post*, 9 December 2016: huffingtonpost.com.au/sam-duncan/our-obsession-with-sport-has-reached-religious-proportions_a_21623855/; Dominic Sandbrook, 'We've never been so obsessed with sport, but there's so much of it on TV that we've become a nation of couch potato champions', *The Daily Mail*, 26 June 2012: dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2164676/.

to apply my conclusions. I recall, as a junior high schooler, sitting in the assembly hall one day considering the question of whether I would give up cricket if God asked me to. While this would be a pretty easy question for most Christians to resolve, for me it was a big issue. I wrestled with it, and eventually concluded with some reluctance that I would.

Over the years, I have realized that sport—like most areas of human endeavour—can be a real plus or a real minus for one’s Christian life and for the kingdom of God. It opens up many opportunities for the believer, but also exposes them to various dangers. On the positive side, sport enables the Christian to enjoy one’s self, glorify God, meet and spend time with people, encourage believers, witness to non-believers, develop one’s character, improve one’s health, enjoy rest and recreation, provide entertainment, and be entertained. For some it can open up opportunities to travel, and for others it may even provide employment. All of these things have been true for me, and I am very grateful for them. God has given human beings the capacity to invent sports, and, as Paul writes in 1 Timothy 4:4, “everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving”.

But, sadly, like so many other good things in God’s world, sport is marred by sin and can expose a Christian to many real dangers. There is the danger of turning sport into an idol. It can become an obsession, dominate our thinking, detrimentally affect our moods, keep us away from church and Christian fellowship, and cause us to do foolish things. Participation can bring out poor sportsmanship, anger and violence. Spending extended time with non-believing sportspeople can expose

the follower of Jesus to temptations such as alcohol and drug abuse, and sexual immorality. Sport *can* hinder our spiritual growth. We probably know of, or have read about, Christian sportspeople who have fallen badly into sin. Sadly, at all levels, the courts and fields of this planet are littered with people who once appeared to live as Christians, but now no longer call Jesus ‘Lord’. For some, sport seems to have played a role in their demise.

Accordingly, it comes as no surprise that, throughout history, Christians have had something of a ‘hot and cold’ relationship with sport. The apostle Paul seemed quite fond of sporting metaphors in his letters (e.g. 1 Cor 9:24-27; Gal 5:7), whereas the early church father Tertullian asserted that the games of his day were “idolatry” and “belong to the devil”.⁶

Fast forward almost 2,000 years to the 1980s. Graham Daniels was a 21-year-old playing first team professional football with Cambridge United when he was converted to the Christian faith. Not long afterwards, a kindly old gentleman from his church took him aside and said, “You’ll be giving up this soccer now to concentrate on the Lord’s work, won’t you?” The man clearly saw little value in the game of football. Graham was shattered.⁷

Significantly, at around the same time, another older Christian man from the same church, a professor at Cambridge University, started to meet up regularly with Graham to read

6 Tertullian, *On the Spectacles*, chapter IV, trans. TR Glover, Loeb Classical Library 250, HUP, Cambridge, MA, 1966, p. 243.

7 Unless otherwise indicated, all direct quotations throughout this book are from personal interviews conducted by the author.

the Bible and pray. He encouraged Graham to keep playing football, which he did. These days, Graham is General Director of Christians in Sport in the UK.

So, you are a Christian and you like sport. You may be a professional sportsperson, someone for whom it is a serious part-time pursuit, or perhaps—like most people—someone who simply dabbles for a little diversion. You may be the parent of a sportsperson, a coach, a pastor, or a fan. You want to think about how Christianity and your sports involvement fit together. You know that as a follower of Jesus you are supposed to seek first God's kingdom (Matt 6:33), and to love God and your neighbour (Mark 12:28-31). How does your athletic interest fit in with this? How do they come together, rather than being two apparently separate aspects of your existence?

Thankfully, an increasing amount of academic work is being done in the area of sport and Christianity, much of which is very helpful and stimulating.⁸ In addition, biographies of believing sportspeople can be found on the shelves of Christian bookstores, many of which are quite inspiring.⁹ This book is a little different. It is not an academic book (although it does draw upon scholarly research), nor is it a Christian biography (although it does contain the stories and testimo-

8 For a good summary, see Nick J Watson and Andrew Parker, 'Sports and Christianity: Mapping the Field', in *Sports and Christianity: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, Nick J Watson and Andrew Parker (eds), Routledge, New York, 2013, pp. 9-88.

9 For example, Duncan Hamilton, *For the Glory: Olympic Legend Eric Liddell's Journey of Faith and Survival*, Penguin, New York, 2016; and Norman Grubb, *C.T. Studd: Cricketer and Pioneer*, Lutterworth, Guildford, 1982.

nies of Christian sportspeople). Rather, by drawing on the Scriptures, the writings of other Christians, my own experiences, and the experiences of other Christian sportspeople of all levels from around the world, it seeks to help the Christian person—whether player, parent or pastor—to think about sport in a Christian way.

Sport, like so many other areas of life, can be a real force for good or for evil. My hope is that this book would help us to make it the former not the latter, a plus rather than a minus for our spiritual lives, and a help rather than a hindrance to the kingdom of God.

1

PLAYING BY THE BOOK

What the Bible says about sport

**The LORD God took the man
and put him in the Garden of Eden
to work it and take care of it.**

(Genesis 2:15)



“Why do you play sport?” If you’d asked me that question when I was in primary school, I would have said it was because I loved it. It was fun. Arriving home from school, I didn’t need much convincing to go out into the backyard and play any one of a number of games. If you’d asked me in high school why I played, I might have come up with a few more reasons. I would still have said that I played for fun; I may or may not have admitted that sporting success was good for my self-esteem; and, as a Christian, I would have been alert to the opportunities sport gave me to speak about my faith. But, if the truth be known, I was not overly reflective at the time about *why* I played sport—really, the dominant reason was because I enjoyed it.

As such, an end-of-season speech given by the coach of

the local under-16 soccer team in which I played absolutely floored me. I was stunned. Even today, over 35 years later, I still muse over his words.

Under our coach's guidance, we'd gone from being a solid suburban team to winning our local first division competition. And, in the season just completed, we had made the semi-finals of the Champion of Champions tournament—a knockout competition involving the first division premiers from around the state.

Our coach was the absolute salt of the earth. An engineer turned barrister, he had given up his Friday nights and Saturdays for about five years to look after us. We were a pretty decent bunch, but, like most teenagers, we had our moments. Our coach (almost) always bore it all in good humour as he patiently sought to teach us the basic and finer points of the game. I really liked him—as I'm pretty sure the whole team did—and I appreciated his dedication to us and to the sport. So it was with feelings of great positivity that we, players and parents alike, settled back to listen to what he had to say about the season.

I hadn't really given it much thought but, if asked, would have assumed he was going to express his appreciation to the parents and to our club. Perhaps he'd reflect on our season's success and highlight a few amusing incidents—at least that's what I would have done.

And then he said it. They may even have been his opening words: “The reason I really enjoy coaching these boys is because playing soccer is great preparation for life.”

What?!?! What did he say?!?! I didn't hear anything much

after that. My mind was agog. Is *that* what he thought all this was about? I thought we were all playing (and coaching) because we liked soccer—that it was fun, a great game. I could probably even have conceded that it was good for building friendships and fitness. But I hadn't realized that it was supposed to have anything to do with 'life'.

It raises a good question: why *do* people play sport?

Why play sport?

Robert Ellis, an Oxford University academic, has addressed this very question. He undertook a survey of sportspeople in which around 100 respondents gave their reasons for participation in sport. Ellis then grouped their answers into five main categories: fitness and health; relief of general stress; social motives; enjoyment of competition; and simple enjoyment.¹ This is a good list, and one to which most sportspeople can easily relate.

But these are the sorts of reasons that people willingly shared. There are also other reasons for involvement in sport which participants may choose not to admit, or of which they may not even be aware. For example, some may play sport because of self-esteem issues or personal identity issues, to win the respect of a parent, or because they are subject to broader social forces.²

1 Robert Ellis, *The Games People Play: Theology, Religion, and Sport*, Wipf & Stock, Eugene, 2014, p. 168.

2 Ellis suggests some less conscious reasons for playing sport which relate to issues such as developmental needs, identity, and religious motivations (Ellis, pp. 175-89).

All these reasons, both conscious and subconscious, must be extremely powerful, given the level at which sport saturates the vast majority of cultures on the planet. But are they *good* reasons for Christians to play sport? Believers, after all, are supposed to take their cues not from what everyone else is doing, but from God and his word.

As noted earlier, and as we will see in the next chapter, Christians over the years have come to quite a range of views regarding the merits and appropriateness of believers involving themselves with sport. Some of these perspectives were well presented in the classic movie *Chariots of Fire*. This movie follows the real-life fortunes of two British runners preparing for the 1924 Paris Olympic Games—Scot Eric Liddell and Englishman Harold Abrahams.

Liddell was a committed Christian, the son of missionary parents. Fairly early in the movie and well before the Paris Olympics, Eric, his father, and another man discuss Eric's running. His father tells him, "You're the proud possessor of many gifts, and it's your sacred duty to put them to good use". The other man then notes that the Christian mission cannot but gain by Eric's athletic success: "What we need now is a muscular Christian to make folks sit up and notice."

But the film depicts Eric's sister Jennie as being not nearly as enthusiastic. She reproaches him on one occasion when he is late for a church meeting because of his running: "Training, training, training. All I ever hear is training. Do you believe in what we're doing here or not?" She later confesses, "I'm fright-

ened for you. I'm frightened for what it all might do to you."³ Eric then tries to reassure his sister: "I believe that God made me for a purpose—for China [where he would eventually be a missionary]. But he also made me fast, and when I run, I feel his pleasure. To give it up would be to hold him in contempt."

So there we have some reasons for Christians playing sport—using one's gifts, to support Christian mission, and for the spiritual pleasure of it. We also have some reasons not to do so—the danger of exposure to bad influences, and the danger of prioritizing sport above what are perceived to be more spiritual issues.

This range of views can still be seen today. Clearly, many Christians think that involvement in sport is a positive thing. Consider the many Christian sporting organizations around the globe—for example, large international and national groups such as Christians in Sport and Athletes in Action, along with the more specialized local organizations like the South Manchester and Cheshire Christian Football League. People in these groups obviously believe there is a lot to be gained by the Christian person playing sport. I don't know of any Christian organizations that exist to *discourage* believers

3 While broadly accurate, the movie does take some cinematic licence. Jennie Liddell was, in fact, a young girl living with her missionary parents in China when Eric ran in Paris. See 'Jennie Liddell Biography', *IMDB*: imdb.com/name/nm0509171/bio. In real life, she was supportive of her brother's running. See Alex von Tunzelmann, 'Chariots of fire: history gets the runaround', *The Guardian*, 19 July 2012: theguardian.com/film/2012/jul/19/chariots-fire-reel-history. Nevertheless, her character in the movie exemplifies the way some Christians at the time felt about sport.

from playing sport, but anecdotal evidence of believers with more negative views are common. Consider the testimony of Graham Daniels in the introduction, who was encouraged to give up playing football soon after his conversion.

So, how *should* Christians think about sport? Is it a good thing, a bad thing, or a neutral thing? To find the answers, we need to go to God's word.

The Bible on sport

There are quite a number of references to sport in the Scriptures. And I'm not going to catalogue all those lame jokes about sport in the Bible, which involve things like 'Rebekah walking to the well with a pitcher', or 'Peter standing up with the eleven'. No, there are passages which actually do refer to sport. There are verses that speak about running a race (Ps 19:5; Gal 2:2, 5:7; Phil 2:16; 2 Tim 4:7; Heb 12:1), training (1 Tim 4:8), and winning a prize (Phil 3:14; 2 Tim 2:5, 4:8). One passage talks about all three, plus boxing:

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air. No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize. (1 Cor 9:24-27)

While highly evocative, these passages are really using sport to help illustrate other points—for example, living the Christian life, godliness, perseverance and hope. They are not primarily seeking to teach us about sport—for example, *whether, why, how, and how much* we should play sport. To think about these sorts of questions, we will need to take more general biblical teaching and apply it to the topic of sport. Thankfully, there has been an increasing amount of thought given to this area over recent decades.⁴

Since we are going to apply biblical principles to sport, it would be helpful at this point to set out what exactly we mean by *sport* and also by the related nouns *play* and *game*. *Play* might be defined as an unstructured activity undertaken for its own sake—to creatively enjoy something for its own intrinsic good. An example would be throwing a rock at a can placed on a wall. A *game* is play where rules are added, such as a game of chasings played in a school playground. Finally, *sport* is where the rules of a game are universalized and a sense of genuine competition is added. It usually involves physical and mental exertion, and is marked by a significant element of skill that can be refined by practice. Examples of sport would be football, basketball and cricket.⁵ Thus, *sport* can be understood as a subset of *games*, which is a subset of *play*.

4 See Jeremy R Treat, 'More than a Game: A Theology of Sport', *Themelios*, vol. 40, no. 3, December 2015, p. 392; and Watson and Parker, pp. 9-88. For the structure of this chapter—particularly definitions, and the concepts of delighting in and developing creation, the intrinsic and instrumental value of sport, and the dangers of idolatry and immorality—I was greatly assisted by Treat's article.

5 For these definitions see Ellis, pp. 3, 128-9; and Treat, pp. 395-6.

We can find the theological basis for play, games and sport in the creation account. Genesis 1:31 tells us, “God saw all that he had made, and it was very good”. God places humanity into this beautiful creation and gives them the opportunity to freely enjoy almost all of it: “And the LORD God commanded the man, ‘You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil’” (Gen 2:16-17). Of course, we know the man ended up eating from the tree from which he was forbidden to eat, but this should not blind us to the fact that everything else there was open to humanity for their enjoyment and delight. Except for the tree of knowledge of good and evil, *all* of God’s creation was there for humanity to appreciate.

Sport, of course, is not a naturally occurring phenomenon. But humanity was not intended to simply *delight* in the creation—we were also called to *develop* it. God told humanity in Genesis 1:28 to “fill the earth and subdue it”, and then Genesis 2:15 says: “The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it”. The instruction to subdue the earth and take care of the garden—that is, to develop creation—is essentially a command to create culture. This is sometimes referred to as the *cultural mandate*.⁶ As John Stott has said: “‘Nature’ is what God gives; ‘culture’ is what we

6 On the cultural mandate, see Michael W Goheen and Craig G Bartholomew, *Living at the Crossroads: An Introduction to Christian Worldview*, Baker, Grand Rapids, 2008, pp. 153-4; and Treat, pp. 394-5. The term ‘cultural mandate’ can be associated with a variety of views around Christian involvement in culture and politics. I am simply using the term here to describe developing creation or creating culture as per Genesis 1:28 and 2:15.

do with it”.⁷ Sport, along with numerous other activities such as music, dance and literature, is just one of the ways in which culture has been developed. It has been reasonably asserted that the God-given instinct to play “would inevitably develop into something more”.⁸

It is also intriguing to note that play does not appear to be simply a temporal concern. Play, it seems, will be found in the new creation:

This is what the LORD Almighty says: “Once again men and women of ripe old age will sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each of them with cane in hand because of their age. The city streets will be filled with boys and girls playing there.”
(Zech 8:4-5)

Sport has *intrinsic* value

So it can be said that sport (a subset of play) has *intrinsic* value—that is, it is good in and of itself. God has created us and placed us in a good world, and he has given us the cultural mandate along with the ingenuity to fulfil that mandate. Sport is one of the good things that has arisen as a result. Unless their rules are unethical—for example, fight-to-the-death gladiatorial contests—sports can be viewed as gifts from God to be enjoyed with thanksgiving (1 Tim 4:4).

Having made the point that sport has intrinsic value, let’s

7 John W Stott, *New Issues Facing Christians Today*, 3rd edn, Marshall Pickering, London, 1999, p. 193.

8 Treat, p. 395.

address a few potential concerns—unhelpful dualistic views, and doubts about the very idea of competition.

Dualistic views

Some people may disagree with the assertion that sport is an intrinsically good gift from God if they are affected by either of two unhelpful forms of dualistic thinking—“an ascetic body/soul dualism” that sees sport as bad, or “a sacred/secular dualism” that views sport as merely neutral.⁹

An unbiblical body/soul dualism has sometimes been imported into Christian thinking. The early church developed in a world that was strongly influenced by Greek thought—a strong strand of which elevated the soul and the spiritual, and downplayed the body and the physical. Some of this thinking wrongly crept into Christian belief. By contrast, the Scriptures teach that God created the physical world, including our bodies, and pronounced it “good” (Gen 1:31). How could something that God created and pronounced ‘good’ be bad or of little importance? We must not let Greek-style dualistic thinking negatively influence our thinking about the body, about the physical, and about sport.¹⁰

But another unhelpful distinction can also affect our thinking here: sacred/secular dualism. According to this view, God cares about *sacred* activities such as prayer, Bible study, evangelism and church, while *secular* activities such as work, sport,

9 Treat, p. 397.

10 On this form of dualistic thinking, see Treat, p. 397; and Watson and Parker, p. 17.

music and art are neutral and only matter to God if they are promoting some sacred activity. The fact that sacred activities are clearly of immense importance should not lead us to conclude that other activities that involve developing and delighting in God's creation, such as sport, are merely neutral. No, sport is intrinsically good.

Competition

Another area of concern for some is competition. Theologians Michael W Goheen and Craig G Bartholomew suggest that “sports and competition [...] are gifts of God in creation, to be richly enjoyed with thanksgiving”.¹¹ Wait a second! Can we say that *competition* is a gift from God? Doesn't competition lead to a whole lot of unhealthy and negative consequences such as abuse, cheating, hatred and violence? What about that quote from the legendary American football coach Vince Lombardi: “To play [football] you must have fire in you, and there is nothing that stokes that fire like hate”?¹²

Of course—as with every other form of human culture—competitive sport, when impacted by sin, produces very negative results, and we will discuss sin's impact on sport throughout this book. But competition in itself is not a bad thing. It can be a very good thing that enhances the athletic experience and, in some cases, is almost essential to the athletic experience. Goheen and Bartholomew argue, “In sports, teams or individuals agree cooperatively to oppose one another within the

11 Goheen and Bartholomew, p. 153.

12 Goheen and Bartholomew, p. 154.

stated goals, rules, and obstacles of the game. In other words, cooperation, not rivalry, is at the heart of competition.” If you want a good game of basketball, you need a team to play against. We can love our neighbour by providing stiff competition.¹³ I can certainly testify that some of my most satisfying sporting experiences have been close games or athletic competitions—some of which I won, and some of which I lost.

Sport has *instrumental* value

So, we have argued that sport has *intrinsic* value. But sport also has immense *instrumental* value—that is, participation in it can lead to many other positive outcomes.

We do not have to look far to find people singing the praises of the instrumental benefits of sport. The Western Australian Government’s Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries lists 30 ways in which sport and recreation benefits people and communities.¹⁴ Some of these benefits include:

- » bringing people together, providing opportunities for social interaction
- » contributing to higher levels of self-esteem and self-worth

13 On the potentially positive aspects of competition, including the quote, see Goheen and Bartholomew, p. 154.

14 ‘Sport and recreation research and policy’, *Government of Western Australia*, 3 July 2019: dlgsc.wa.gov.au/sport-and-recreation/benefits-to-the-community.

- » creating positive alternatives to youth offending, anti-social behaviour, and crime
- » healthy workers are more productive and take fewer sick days
- » improvements in mental health.

Sport is very often seen as promoting character and physical health. American tennis great Billie Jean King has said that sport “teaches you character, it teaches you to play by the rules, it teaches you to know what it feels like to win and lose—it teaches you about life”.¹⁵ It was this sort of benefit that was spoken of by my under-16s soccer coach all those years ago. Indian cricket superstar Kapil Dev affirmed sport’s physical benefits when he said, “Apart from education, you need good health, and for that, you need to play sports”.¹⁶

As Christians, we will add our own instrumental benefits to the list set out above. We would want to add, for example, that sport can provide ways to promote evangelism, and provide opportunities to encourage other believers. We’ll say much more about these benefits in chapters to come.

15 ‘Trailblazer and Changemaker: Billie Jean King’, *National Coalition of Girls’ Schools*, 22 February 2018: ncgs.org/advocacy/blog/2018/02/22/trailblazer-and-changemaker-billie-jean-king/.

16 ‘Education and Good Health are Essence of Life and Sports Boost them Further’, *Be an Inspirer*, 20 June 2019: beaninspirer.com/education-and-good-health-are-essence-of-life-and-sports-boost-them-further/.

The impact of sin on sport

So, sport is a good gift of God. But, as I expect is painfully clear to most of us, sport, like all areas of life, is impacted by sin. And sin is insidious. It can take a good thing like sport and twist it into, or associate it with, something bad—*immorality*; it can also take a good thing and seek to elevate it into an ultimate thing—*idolatry*.¹⁷ While we will consider the dangers associated with sport in the chapters that follow, it might be helpful to expand briefly on idolatry and immorality here.

Idolatry

Idolatry takes something and puts it in the place of God. It is the idol rather than God that determines how we live. It is not hard to find apparent examples in the world of sport. For example, Bill Shankly, the legendary Liverpool Football Club manager from 1959 to 1974, is alleged to have said: “Some people believe football is a matter of life and death, I am very disappointed with that attitude. I can assure you it is much, much more important than that.”¹⁸

Articles describing the idolatrous influence of sport (although they don’t usually use that term) are similarly easy to locate. Consider the following extracts from three different countries:

17 Treat, p. 398. Actually, idolatry can be understood as taking anything—good or bad—and putting it in the place of God in one’s life.

18 Ellis, p. 165.

As a nation, Australia's obsession with sport has reached religious proportions. We are more religious about sport than religion itself.¹⁹

For we [the writer is in the UK] live in an era when, thanks to television, sport is marketed as a matter of life and death.²⁰

These days, it seems as if America's No. 1 priority isn't peace, equality, justice, or caring for our fellow Americans—it's sports.²¹

Resisting the idolatrous allure of sport may take some work. Robert Ellis has suggested that sport has, for some, “taken on some of the characteristics of religion, and that it may exercise functions in the individual, social, and cultural lives similar to the functions that were once exercised by organized religion”. He notes that sport, like organized religion, has ritualistic, mythological, doctrinal, ethical, social, experiential, and material dimensions.²² It comes as no surprise that, for many, sport becomes a god.

Strictly speaking, Christians cannot be guilty of idolatry as Christians cannot have something other than God occupying God's place in their lives. However, Christians can experience

19 Duncan, 'Our Obsession With Sport Has Reached Religious Proportions'.

20 Sandbrook, 'We've never been so obsessed with sport, but there's so much of it on TV that we've become a nation of couch potato champions'.

21 Frank Carson, '10 Reasons Sports are America's No. 1 Priority', *The Cheat Sheet*, 8 January 2015: cheatsheet.com/sports/10-reasons-sports-are-americas-no-1-priority.html.

22 Ellis, pp. 108-22; cf. Treat, p. 399.

the tempting allure of sporting idolatry, and for some there may be a real danger of adopting what we might call an *idolatrous attitude* towards sport—that is, developing an unhelpful obsession with, or reliance on, sport. For example, for some believers sport is not so much an idol as a crutch. We become a little too reliant on it. We are Christians; God is first in our lives; we find our significance, identity and self-worth in him—mostly. But perhaps, without our realizing it, sport is something that helps prop up our self-image. We don't just enjoy sport; we start to lean on it. But only God can bear the weight of providing our ultimate sense of self-worth and happiness.

Immorality

Sport's association with various forms of immorality is also a real problem. In their overview of research on the ethics of sport, Watson and Parker set out some of the key danger areas:

- » physical and verbal abuse of opponents (and even teammates)
- » fan violence, including sectarianism
- » intimidation and trash talk
- » cheating, and blatant disregard for the spirit of the rules
- » mistaking legality for ethicality
- » sexual abuse of athletes by coaches
- » trash talk
- » financial greed and corruption
- » alienation in individual and international relations
- » invasive noncorrective surgery to enhance athletic performance

- » drug-doping
- » abuse of officials
- » genetic-enhancement technologies
- » abusive child and youth elite development academies
- » overtraining and abuse of one's body
- » the potential deleterious effects of excessive expectation and pressure from parents, coaches, and even nations.²³

Wow! The list takes some digesting, and the sad thing is that we could all probably add a few further items. I can recall a few occasions where I failed in a couple of the listed areas, and I've also witnessed other Christian sportspeople similarly struggle at times.

Sport can also be associated with immorality off the field as well as on it. In my experience, and from speaking with many other Christian sportsmen and women of all standards around the world, the most widespread off-field dangers are excessive alcohol consumption and sexual immorality—perils found in many other spheres of life. Sadly, there are many examples of Christians involved in top-flight sport who have fallen badly and publicly when faced with temptations in these areas.

Living as a Christian in a sporting context—or any context, for that matter—involves struggle. The stronger our relationship with God, the better we will do. But none of us are perfect.

Former Australian rugby union captain Nick Farr-Jones became a Christian in his teenage years. He has sought to live out his faith both during and after his international career

23 Watson and Parker, pp. 28-9.

in a variety of positive ways. Reflecting honestly on his playing days, he admits that he sometimes found the context of international sport very challenging for his Christian faith. “I stumbled from time to time,” he confesses, “but that is the great thing about the cross—we are forgiven for all the times we have fallen short”. That is a hugely encouraging truth!

Perspective and priority

So there are many good reasons to play sport (both intrinsic and instrumental) and there are many dangers to avoid (idolatrous attitudes and immorality). But as potentially great as it can be, for the Christian sport is not the main game—following Jesus is. God has shown his incredible love for us in many ways—particularly in sending his Son for us (John 3:16). Our priority is to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness (Matt 6:33). In doing this, we strive to love God and our neighbours in ways that are consistent with Scripture (e.g. Mark 12:28-31; John 14:15; Rom 13:8), knowing that God’s Spirit motivates and empowers us for this task (Phil 2:13). Some athletes prioritize their sport and fit the rest of their lives around it; Christians prioritize God and fit all aspects of their life—including sport—around serving him. Many athletes hope for medals, trophies and premierships. Those can be good things. But Christians also seek something far greater:

Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. (1 Cor 9:25)

How much better to have God say to us “Well done, good and faithful servant!” (Matt 25:21) at the end of our lives than to have a sporting official hang a medal around our neck.

Living a life devoted to serving God will see us want to live in a close relationship with God. We’ll also want to help others to get into and live in a close relationship with God. This will mean prioritizing Bible reading, prayer, fellowship, discipleship, evangelism, serving others, family relationships, and using our gifts in ways appropriate to our life circumstances. How this will impact someone’s sport will vary from person to person. For some, wise Christian living may mean playing a lot of sport; for others, it will mean a moderate amount of sport; and for yet others it will mean no sport at all.

It is interesting to contrast two Christians who were also English cricketing greats. One, CT Studd, a popular test cricketer of the 1880s, stopped playing competitive sport soon after his conversion. Another, David Sheppard, an international of the 1950s and 60s, played cricket and represented his country for a number of years after his ordination as an Anglican minister.²⁴

Some people reading this book may be nervous about putting their sporting life under the lordship of Christ. A voice in the back of their heads may tell them that God is a killjoy and wants to rip them off. It may whisper that perhaps it’s okay to give some areas of their life to God, but not their sport. Could I just say that we can trust all aspects of our lives—including our sporting involvement—to God.

24 Ellis, p. 85.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3:16)

We can trust everything to someone who loves us that much. Furthermore, I would argue that we get more out of our sporting lives by putting God first. I believe I enjoyed my sport a lot more over the years by doing this.

Men’s tennis was massive in the 1980s with greats like Bjorn Borg, John McEnroe and Jimmy Connors dominating the world stage. During that time, an American Christian by the name of Gene Mayer rose to become the fourth best player in the world. He was extremely talented, but for Gene, tennis was not his life—it was part of his Christian life. He once said, “I acknowledged before God that my tennis was his”. This shaped the way he arranged his life. Could he have made number one in the world? Gene explains:

In order to have possibly been number one in the world, it would have taken a rearrangement of my priorities, which I [was] not willing to do. [...My priorities were] first, having a relationship with God that is healthy, then, having a healthy relationship with my family, and then to think of tennis as my occupation.²⁵

As wonderful as sport can be, there is something far better.

25 Andrew Wingfield Digby, *The Loud Appeal: Playing by God’s Rules*, Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1988, pp. 110-11.