

Christian Engagement with Sport – Past and Present

To understand the social phenomenon of sport and the ‘pull’ on Christians today, it is helpful to consider how Christians have participated in sport in the past; hence a brief selective historical summary of Christian involvement is now provided followed by a summary of philosophies of approach in engaging with the sports culture. This account will illustrate some of the successes and struggles of the Christian transformational agenda engagement with sport, thus providing a contextual backdrop for understanding some of the contemporary issues Christians face today in seeking to engage with the world of sport in order to see transformation.

A historical perspective on Christian engagement with sport.

It is not known what the early church thought about sport but the apostle Paul used sports as an effective way to illustrate biblical principles e.g. 1 Corinthians 9:24-27. Thus there is an assumption that Paul’s audience was familiar with sport because of mass popular appeal. The Bible does not condemn nor is there anything negative suggested in early Christian tradition towards sport as such. Increasingly however under Roman rule through to the ‘Middle Ages’ sport became more violent and therefore would have been problematic for church involvement.

During the 17th and 18th Centuries in England and the United States, the suppression of popular sport was tied to a particular religious movement and motif i.e. the Puritan disdain for games.¹ The Puritans stood for observance of the Lord’s Day and thus sporting participation on Sundays was frowned upon because sports were considered to be devilish pastimes.

From about 1820 aristocracy sports expanded and the first organised games took place in England in 1849 resulting in the flourishing of sport in British and America schools.² New games were invented (some by Christians e.g. basketball and volleyball) and there was a gradual exporting of games to the lower classes throughout the 19th Century in the hope of producing respectability in the participants.

In the 1870’s the majority of English football clubs (including some familiar professional teams today e.g. Southampton and Fulham) were sponsored by churches.³ By 1900 the vast majority of teams in Liverpool originated from church organisations and the core of the newly formed football league were sponsored by socio-religious bodies including clubs such as Bolton, Wolverhampton and Swindon. The Boy Scout movement and the YMCA played a role in developing an ideology labelled as ‘Muscular Christianity’ which believed that through sport Christian character (i.e. morality and manliness) could be built into young boys.⁴ The Olympic Games movement had strong ideological links with Muscular Christianity highlighted by Pierre de Coubertin’s address to the members of the International Olympic committee in London by stating “the importance ... is not so much to win as to take part ... The important thing in life is not the triumph but the struggle”.⁵ ‘Muscular Christianity’ was named by J J Rousseau in the

¹ Coleman, J, “Sport and the Contradictions of Society.” *International Journal for Theology* 5, 205: (1985), p. 24.

² Coleman, p. 25.

³ Coleman, p. 26.

⁴ McCown, L and Gin, V, J, *Focus on Sport in Ministry*. Marietta, 360 Sports, 2003, p. 115.

⁵ Watson, N J, Weir, S & Friend, S, “Muscular Christianity and beyond”. *Journal of Religion and Society*, 2005, p. 17.

19th Century and acted as a summary of a Christian ethical approach to sport.⁶ The movement believed that the positive influence of sport could be transferred to other areas of life.

During the 19th Century, Rugby School headmaster Thomas Arnold had the aim of turning out Christian gentlemen. Sport was part of this process because it was believed that it produced discipline, social responsibility, self-reliance and the ability to govern others. Moral excellence without neglecting the intellect was desired and participation in traditional team sports was used. This philosophy was epitomised by Thomas Hughes in 1856 with his book 'Tom Brown School Days'. Thus Muscular Christians developed strategies through sport that could be used for moral education.⁷ The role of leadership through coaches was endorsed; an ethical model of respect for authority, loyalty and obedience was communicated. The twin goals of making the bad in society good and the good of society better were embraced;⁸ thus emphasis was placed on using the experience of sport to educate.

As the Victorian age developed the components of industrialisation, imperialism and evangelisation, sport was catapulted into the global culture.⁹ The heightened awareness of a world that knew no gospel meant missionaries travelled the planet, some bringing with them the sports that were being embraced in their homelands. Therefore Muscular Christianity was adopted as a mission tool during this period and some of leading exponents were Moody, Studd, the Cambridge Seven and Liddell.¹⁰ Sport was seen as an important agent of moral discipline, mission and evangelism hence the church's eagerness to participate.

However attitudes changed during the early part of the 20th Century. Sporting organisations grew with various forms of business patronage, dramatic increase in crowd sizes, media interest, transportation development, commercialism, gambling and professionalism meant that 'stars' emerged as the innocence of sport was changed.¹¹ Modern themes of sport e.g. professionalism, sporting icons, commercialisation, bureaucracy, nationalism, mass spectatorship and media coverage found roots in the late 1930's. The resulting commercialisation of sport led to an increasing influence and interaction with the economy. During this crucial development time, churches generally disengaged with the sports culture as fundamentalist attitudes within the church resisted involvement in such a cultural climate. The Christian origins of many games did not survive this time of development as a parting of the ways seemed inevitable as the spirit of play was forced out to accommodate business. The lack of leavening influence from the Christian community in the development of sport resulted in the lack of input or influence into the ethos and ethics of sport.¹²

During the 1950's in the USA, Christianity and sport started to reengage again because the appeal of sport meant that the aims of attracting a crowd at Christian youth revivals could be accomplished.¹³ Between 1952 and 1966, institutionalisation took place as Christian

⁶ Weir, S, *What the book says about Sport*. Oxford: Bible Reading Fellowship, 2000, p. 27.

⁷ Ladd, T and Mathisen, J A, *Muscular Christianity: Evangelical Protestants and the Development of American Sport*. Grand Rapids: Bridge Point Books, 1999, p. 64.

⁸ Ladd, p. 231.

⁹ Connor, S, *Sports Outreach: Principles and Practise for Successful Sports Ministry*. Tain: Christian Focus Publications, 2003, p. 30.

¹⁰ Watson, Weir & Friend, p.14.

¹¹ Coleman, p. 27.

¹² Ladd, p. 94.

¹³ Ladd, p. 122.

sportspeople started to organise specialist sports ministries within the larger sports culture.¹⁴ This experiment took on a life of its own as it became a catalyst for Christian involvement globally. Support for Christian sportspeople increased with the growing number of chaplains and chaplaincy programmes available.¹⁵

Christian participation in sport even now still has been largely driven by the Muscular Christianity philosophy and the resulting emergence of Christian sports ministry groups (such as AIS) in the latter half of the 20th Century.¹⁶ During this time Christian involvement relocated to America from England and new indigenous models developed reflecting new geographical locations.¹⁷ Christian involvement in sport has now evolved into a multi layer movement that is poised to impact the 21st Century.

The sports culture that the church now tries to engage with has changed dramatically since the church last really embraced sport in the 19th Century. There has been an increase achievement behaviour, marketing, financial turnover, careers, societal influence, mass media and shift to the periphery of non-economic factors such as values. At top level sport, professionalism and commercialisation have become the major characteristics seemingly pushing aside any notions of play. Morality has become confused with money values and 'winning at all costs' seems to have replaced 'sporting spirit'; it is in this environment that Christians and churches are asking the question of 'Why engage with Sport?'.

Christian philosophies on participation in sport.

Sporting religious connections date back to the ancient Olympic Games as sport originated in religious festivals. Christianity at times has embraced this connection and contributed to sport, however it has also disengaged at other crucial times in the development of sport.¹⁸ The principle philosophy of Christian involvement (although probably often not rationalised or articulated by the Christian participant using this terminology) is that participation can be seen as an act of worship, i.e. giving God his worth in the whole of life and offering the body as a living sacrifice (Romans 12:1-2).¹⁹

Christian involvement is birthed within God's created order and God's redemptive plans that span the entire width of creation which could include sport.²⁰ As part of God's creation, it is assumed that humanity is created with the intellect, ingenuity, ability and the resources to create sport. Within this created order, humanity was also created with the capacity for relationships with God, nature, others and thus sport has thrived on this social function. Human creativity is one way people can express inner-self and character thereby it can be a fruit others recognise. Such work can be seen on a sports field as inner-self and character is expressed through the way a person participates in sport. This philosophy has been epitomised by Eric Liddell, the Olympic gold medal runner when he said "God made me for a purpose but

¹⁴ Ladd, p. 135.

¹⁵ Ladd, pp. 141-151 section on the role of sports chaplains.

¹⁶ Watson, Weir & Friend, pp. 2-3.

¹⁷ Ladd, p. 231.

¹⁸ Coleman, pp. 30-31.

¹⁹ Weir S, *What the Book says about Sport*. Oxford: Bible Reading Fellowship, 2000, pp. 24-42 covering G. Daniel's argument from Genesis 1-3 and Romans 12.

²⁰ McCown, pp. 33-34.

He also made me fast and when I run I feel His pleasure. To give it up would be to hold Him in contempt, to win is to honour Him.”²¹

Other biblical principles which have shaped Christian worship philosophy include caring for the human body as a temple for the Holy Spirit, stewardship of talents (Exodus 35) and liberty in Christ (1 Corinthians 9).²² Thus Christians with sporting abilities can respond by using God given talents to impact sport and beyond.²³ For some Christians, the responsibility to practise the stewardship of creativity given by God is seen in the development of sporting skills.

Both the educational and socialising worth of sport have been embraced by some Christians as part of the worship philosophy for participation. Firstly in terms of education, the Muscular Christianity movement continues today as Christians are involved in sport to instil character into potential leaders.²⁴ This is taking place at local grass root levels through to international academic institutions such as Christian colleges and universities who are offering a variety of Sport and Christianity courses.²⁵

Additionally the socialising aspect of sport can be a platform for evangelism. The use of sporting talent could be a natural way of reaching people involved in sport because Christian sportspeople are already part of that culture.²⁶ In contemporary society, experience is seen as a way of validating truth,²⁷ therefore for Christians the sports arena could be seen as a place for truth to be tested in the crucible of the sports experience. In this arena the proclamation, integration and experience of commitment to faith could be communicated.

Some Christian involvement in sport has been to ‘release off enough steam’ so as to sublimate violence. There is little support for this belief though with the observations of rising crime and increase of wars in the sport saturated 20th Century. However there is much to be said though for participation in sport to counter the obesity pandemic that is engulfing the Western world, where Christian participation could offer an alternative healthy lifestyle.²⁸ Bringing all these underpinning elements of a worship philosophy together produces four main areas of focus for participation especially for mission purposes:²⁹

- i. Mission to the people of sport – This is for people who play sport at a competitive level and is based around evangelism plus discipleship to reach what is perceived as un-reached people group by most Christians. Therefore this is a focus on Christian participation and involvement with players, coaches and officials who are actively part of the sports culture at a competitive level.
- ii. Mission through the people of sport – This is where churches use sport as a platform for sharing the truth of Jesus Christ. This has normally been done (but doesn’t have to be the case) through the faith stories of Christian players often by the testimony of high

²¹ Wier, p. 203 quote from ‘Chariots of Fire’ film.

²² Garner, J (ed), *Recreation and Sports Ministry: Impacting Post-modern Culture*. Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2003, pp. 31-34 summary of headings.

²³ Connor, p. 10.

²⁴ Watson, Weir and Friend, p. 18.

²⁵ Watson, Weir and Friend, p. 19 offers courses at York St John College, Notre Dame, Neuman College, South African Theological Seminary and University of Gloucestershire are a few examples in a growing sector.

²⁶ Connor, p. 12.

²⁷ McCown, p. 64.

²⁸ Watson, Weir and Friend, p. 24.

²⁹ McCown, pp. 133-136 heading summary.

profile and elite players using their platform of popularity and position to communicate the Gospel with (usually) spectators and youth. Therefore this is where sport is a mission platform in order to communicate faith.

- iii. Mission in and through the activity of sport – The opportunity to experience sporting endeavour together can accelerate and enhance friendship from which sports mission can take place. The relational connection that comes about easily through sport makes this one of the most natural ways for Christians to share the love of Jesus. Therefore the sharing of the sport activity/experience leads to enhanced opportunities for relationships and friendships that could be developed leading to 'natural' possible mission opportunities e.g. friendship evangelism.
- iv. Mission service in and through sport activity – This area of sports participation by Christians focuses on social concern and education. The characteristics of sport and the opportunities it allows means that encouraging participation can help meet social, physical and mental needs in the world today. Therefore this mission focus can be considered to be where humanitarian or social needs can be met through Christians and churches participating in sport.

Within the Sports Cluster of 'Forum for Change', there is an opportunity to discuss what can be learnt from the past to bring about transformation in and through sport as well as consider what current philosophical sport engagement practises by the Christian church are effective for transformation.

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