

## **How do I engage with Sport?**

In order to engage effectively with sport (especially if there is a desire to bring about transformation in and through sport) then there needs to be some understanding of sport and sports culture. Therefore the aim of this article is to give some insight into the sports culture that people are seeking to transform for good and then consider approaches that could help Christians be effective in their transformational engagement with sport.

### **What is sports culture?**

Within wider society, the sub culture of the “sports world” has developed over the last century and it has become increasingly important in our modern world. What we learn from studying humans in wider society can also be applied to studying people who are part of sports culture. Obviously there is an overlap between sports culture and general culture as sporty people inhabit both worlds but there do seem to be defining characteristics of the sports culture that are helpful to consider in order for Christians to ‘fit in’ and be effective in their transformational participation and engagement with the sports world.

However an evaluation of what is sports culture is a difficult question to answer in view of the size (mass participation), breadth (multitude of sports) and depth (different levels of playing standards) of the sports world. The fan watching sport on the television is part of the sports world just like the multi millionaire sports star but their lives are very different and as a consequence Christian participation with each of these people could well look quite different too. Sports culture is, of itself, too wide a group to consider as a whole because this could involve anything from supporters to elite superstars or a children’s school playground kick about to a World Cup Final. Therefore in order to understand the sports culture better, a breakdown of sport into cultural categories (that could be considered to proximate to the standard sport but not exactly) is offered that then could be applied further to different sports within different cultures. Hence a very general categorisation is offered to help understand participation in the sports world more easily. Thus the sporting experience (a combination of mindset, perspective and ability) may be categorized in the following way<sup>1</sup>:

#### **3.1/ Spectators.**

The largest people group within the sports culture are spectators as usually regardless of involvement of sport at some point most people are spectators of sport. This includes attendance at events or having access to following sport through the media. Spectators are vicariously involved in the sporting action and sometimes perceive sporting heroes to be successful not only in sport but in other areas of life. Often spectators will watch a variety of sports at various levels but sometimes their allegiance will be focused on one sport and one team in particular leading to passionate expressions of devotion in dress, language, time commitments and social networks. This is particularly true within the football culture around the world where the sense of identity and belonging to a football club can be very visible in dress, language and behaviour.

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<sup>1</sup> The breakdown offered and resulting explanation is only a summary of what is covered in much greater depth in McCown, L and Gin, V, J, *Focus on Sport in Ministry*. Marietta, 360 Sports, 2003.

### **3.2/ Novices.**

Novice includes people who are new or at an introductory standard to a sport, therefore skills tend to be at a basic level with little or no level of experience but these people are active learners who are seeking to improve performance. Within this category, adults could be included as they can learn new sports but generally this is a category with a focus on children and youth. Sports activity for novices can include competition nights, tournaments, camps, clinics, teams, sports leagues, schools and coaching maybe even up to college and academy sports programme levels.

### **3.3/ Leisure.**

Most sports participants are part of this category of sports culture. Sport for these people is played recreationally with the emphasis on fun, fitness and enjoyment. These people are attracted to sport activities that encourage participation rather than performance or winning. This could include park sports, fun races and social times around participation in team sports. These activities could well be organized but the emphasis is on participation and a hobby to be enjoyed.

### **3.4/ Players.**

This player category encompasses a wide spectrum of sports, ages and involvement in sport (player, coach, official, administrator etc) but several features are generally present.<sup>2</sup> There is a:

- Performance oriented focus from participants
- Sense of identity, self worth and esteem found in the participants sports experience
- Perspective of participants seeing the world and themselves primarily through their sports experiences;
- Competitive mindset and an attitude that remains long after participation in sports is over;

The characteristics of people in this category are competitiveness, performance based and internally driven to be the best. Whilst the title of this categorisation is 'player' it can include coaches, officials and administrators as well. The higher the level of competition the more sacrifices made by a player, the more important the performance, the greater the focus on ability levels and the sense of identity found within the sport. Often self-image is linked to the sport with the result that the player's lifestyle and experience can be affected especially if known in the community. For some people in this category their sport defines their lives and they define themselves by their sport. If you ask them to tell you a bit about themselves, they will say "I'm a basketball player", "I'm a football referee" or "I'm a hockey coach"; therefore they identify themselves through whatever sport they are involved in.

Training and sacrifice (physical, social and pleasure pursuits) are often priorities for players and as a result other interests and relationships can be impacted. The impact on family life can be significant as a result because it has to tolerate the highs and lows of the sports experience as well put up with unsociable hours. Player participation by Christians) has often

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.servingthepeopleofsport.net/>

been through playing/coaching teams (Church based and secular), tours, coaching programmes, tournaments, officiating and administration.

Players as a group are different from the other categories considered so far in that much of their identity is linked to their sport rather than outside of it i.e. it will be of greater importance in their life in terms of who they are than say their occupation or relationships. There will be a dominant achievement pursuit mentality within the culture of competitive sport that is beyond just physical exertion for fitness but a focus on success and even glory. Someone who plays competitive sport will usually emphasise the importance of winning, training and performance especially if their identity and sense of self-worth is tied up in their sport.

### **3.5/ Elite.**

An elite sportsperson has all the characteristics of the player but with the additions of extra weight of expectation and greater rewards. There is the greater opportunity to fail because the benefit gains from participating at this level in sport e.g. financial rewards, kit, special coaching, travel opportunities and other privileges can be very tangible and attractive. Sport can give status leading to thinking with an elite mentality which may well never be lost even beyond playing days. There is a huge psychological significance when moving from player to elite standard in that performance becomes more important. Within the world of football the shift from player to elite could be easily typified in the shift from amateur/semi pro to professional level with the resulting financial, time and social impact that such a shift in standard could cause. Thus the elite player devotes a great deal of attention to the issue of how to prepare for the game because performance is so important at this level.

However, identity questions could well arise e.g. do people like the elite sportsperson because of who they are or because they are a top player? The social complexity of this role means identity could start to be performance based i.e. a sense of self worth could be linked to the last game played, medals won etc thus creating instability, excessive mood swings, self doubt etc. The pressure to win is no longer just for oneself but for possibly the family who sacrificed so much, the expectations of representing a community of people and this social complexity results in more pressure to win.

There is complexity in relationships in that a team-mate one day can be a rival on the next day for a place at higher level. In training an elite player is co-operating with people with whom they could well be competing with for a place in the starting line-up. As competition within the team increases, relationships within the team can become strained and even break down.

Therefore the elite sportsperson shares much of the same characteristics as a player but there is a greater fear of failure due to the increased pressure to perform as it may well impact their livelihood. Relationships can be a problem for these players because of the fame. Therefore it is difficult for elite players to know real friendship because sometimes people associate with them for vicarious glory. Many of these elements are found particularly in football because of the global popularity and central role the sport.

### **3.6/ High Profile.**

A high profile player has all the player and elite characteristics but with the addition of greater fame from being very well known not just in a team, town but more at country or international

level. Often high profile players cannot go out and do 'normal things' because of their fame and resulting attention off people. Celebrity status can be achieved because of sporting prowess with the resulting wealth and pampering that comes with such a position. This is the smallest and most exclusive category within the sports culture and as a result high profile sportspeople sometimes feel exempt from society's rules. The experience of being idolised by fans means little privacy for these people. Whatever is experienced by elite sportspeople is taken to another level of intensity in the high profile category.

#### **Some observations on such a categorization.**

- a) There will be some overlap between categories across sports and as the individual's perceptions plus recognition develop and change over time e.g. moving from a novice to player to elite to high profile. The nature of the characteristics will intensify depending on the sport and country e.g. Footballer compared to a netball player in the UK. Additionally it can be difficult at times to clarify where some players fit into which categories e.g. when does a player becomes an elite sportsperson?
- b) A greater sense of identity for the individual is found within sport as you move from categories 3.4) - 3.6) i.e. the right hand side of the map in the next section see figure 1 below. Additionally the pressure of the importance of "win/lose" individual performance mindset generally increases across the categories as you move from categories 3.4) - 3.6).

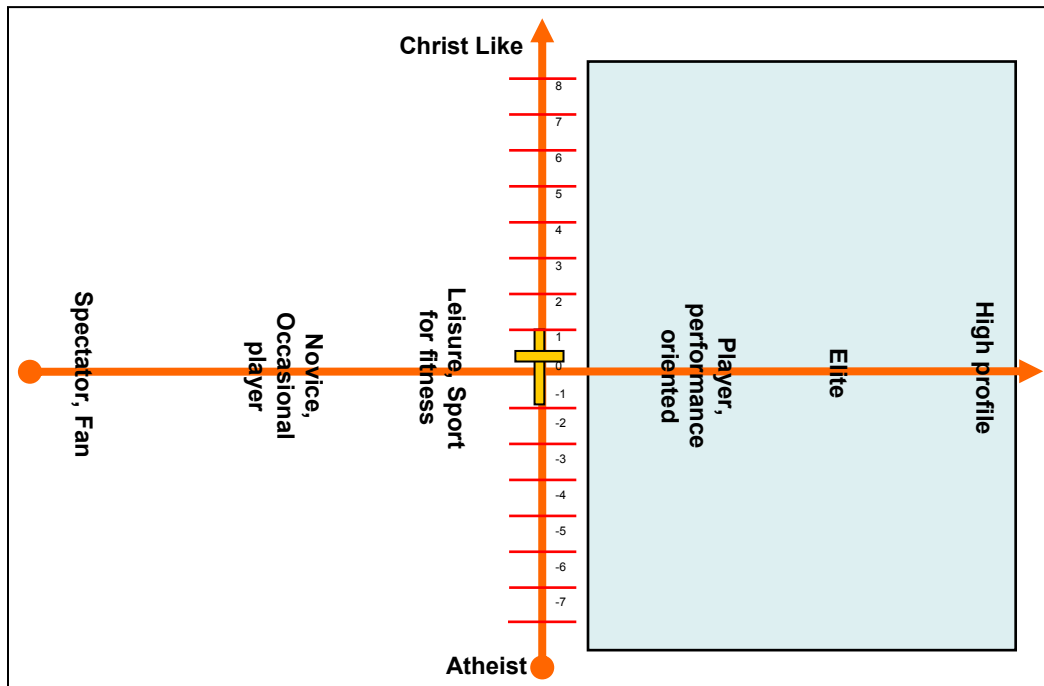
#### **How can effective engagement with the sports culture be mapped out?**

Whilst the summary above provides a very basic breakdown of sports sub cultures, it does not particularly provide guidelines on how Christians can participate effectively within these sub cultures. Lowrie McCown in his book 'Focus on Sport in Ministry' sought to address this issue<sup>3</sup> by adding a spiritual dimension to the breakdown of sports sub-cultures thus creating a ministry in sport map (Copyright Lowrie B McCown – [lmccown@mindspring.com](mailto:lmccown@mindspring.com) see figure 1 below).

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<sup>3</sup> McCown, L and Gin, V, J, *Focus on Sport in Ministry*. Marietta, 360 Sports, 2003.

**Figure 1 – McCown Sport in Ministry Map**



In his map, McCown on the horizontal axis places the sport sub divisions highlighted in the previous section and then adds a spiritual dimension (the Engels Evangelism Scale<sup>4</sup>) which is superimposed to provide a map like grid. Thus the potential spiritual progress of people who are part of the sports culture can be visualised which can be a useful tool when assessing Christian engagement with sport.

**a) The Sport in Ministry Quadrant approach.**

As a result of the intersection of the vertical spiritual axis with the horizontal sport experience axis, 4 clear quadrants (see figure 2 below) emerge that can help shape not only Christian participation with sport but intentional Christian engagement with sport for mission.

Quadrant 1 - Mass appeal, evangelistic programmes for fans & recreation level participants.

Quadrant 2 - Evangelistic outreach to competitive sportspeople.

Quadrant 3 - Discipleship of recreational sportspeople and fans.

Quadrant 4 - Specialized appeal of following up experienced competitive sportspeople.

Therefore on the left hand side of the map in Quadrants 1 & 3 the emphasis will tend to be on “Presenting Christ through Sport” i.e. Teaching Biblical concepts and spiritual truth

<sup>4</sup> The Engels Evangelism Scale is a line of spiritual advancement with the idea that a relationship with God is a journey from no belief (atheism) at -10 towards increasing revelation that leads to receiving Christ at the axis crossing point of 0 and further spiritual growth onto being Christ-like at +10. For each person this journey of spiritual progression with Christ will take different length of time with spurts of growth, stagnation and even back sliding in development. This concept of a spiritual journey with Christ can be helpful in assessing where a person (including sports people) is at in their relationship with Christ.

through the illustrations provided by sports stories to be spiritually applied to the lives of spectators, novices and recreation people either to move them towards Christ, come to Christ or grow in Christ-likeness. This would be very much the approach of the Apostle Paul in the Bible using sport illustrations to teach spiritual truth to his listeners.

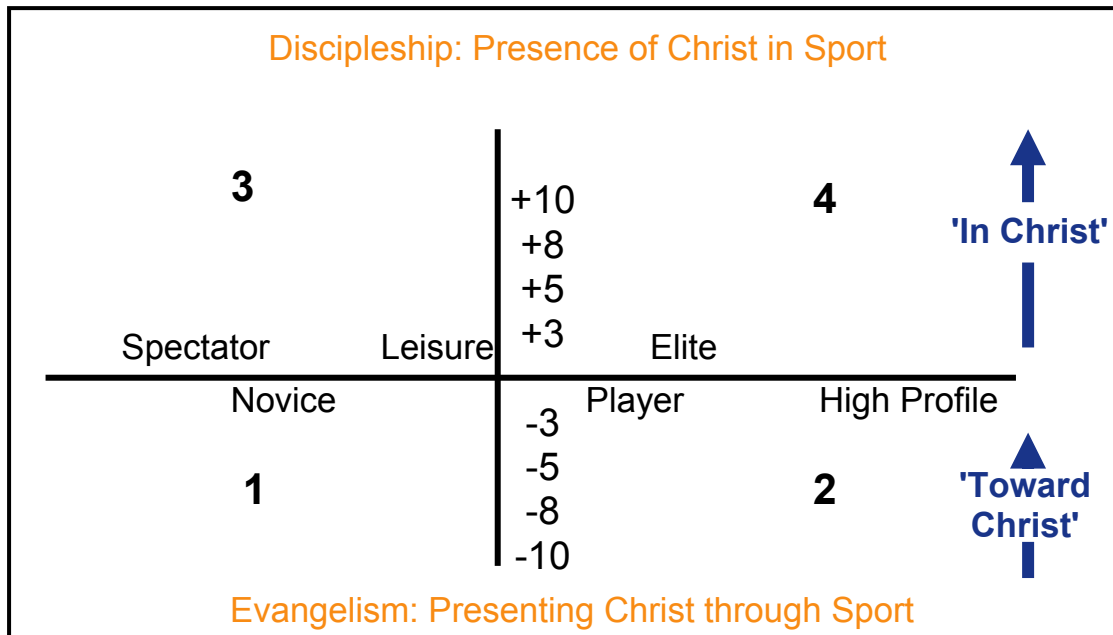
On the right hand side of the map in Quadrants 2 & 4 – the emphasis will tend to be on the “Presence of Christ in Sport” i.e. Use of the shared sport experience as Christians participate at this level. This bridge of participation facilitates the passing on of biblical truth that could lead to application for the sports person in either their sport or life, thus offering the possibility of players, elite and high profile to move towards Christ, come to Christ or grow in Christ likeness.

Working with people on the left hand side of the map will differ from working with people on the right hand side of the map. Therefore the most effective mission engagement will be the one where the sporting activity or participation is set to match the ability of the sports people involved i.e. novices grouped with novices, players grouped with players etc. An activity for elite sportspeople (where a competitive performance orientated emphasis dominates) but is focused on recreation (participation for fun) sports people would not be a comfortable experience nor a sustainable activity as recreational sports people would feel out of their depth and not continue. Alternatively setting up a novice training session for an adult player would not be well received as the player would feel patronized and not taken seriously enough.

Similarly a Christian participant in sport will find greater success in effective engagement if the level of participation is set correctly. A recreational standard player with a recreational mindset will struggle to gain acceptance on the sports-field with say elite players due to the gulf in thinking, attitude and ability. Alternatively an elite player could struggle with feelings of frustration at participating in sport at lower levels thus causing tensions both within the player and for other participants. Therefore activity should match ability and mindset of participants so as to prevent either possible anxiety or boredom of a one size fits all approach to sports mission.

On the bottom half of the map in Quadrants 1 & 2 the emphasis on intentional Christian mission engagement with the sports world is evangelism i.e. communicate the good news of Jesus Christ in the hope of moving people towards accepting Christ as their Lord and Saviour. On the top half of the map in Quadrants 3 & 4 the emphasis on intentional Christian mission engagement with the sports world is discipleship i.e. helping people to grow up in their relationship with Christ.

**Figure 2 - McCown Sport in Ministry Map - Engel scale**



The Sport in Ministry map can provide a picture of the historical Muscular Christianity emphasis on making the bad of society good through evangelism (bottom of map Quadrants 1 & 2) and making the good of society better through discipleship (top of the map Quadrants 3 & 4). Thus in using this map, it is not necessarily creating a new model of Christian engagement with sport but more a visual aid of a re-visitation of an older model of approach that still is being used today.

However just as with the matching the sporting activity to the standard and mindset of the sports participant for effective engagement, care should be taken in the presentation of spiritual truth to match where the listener is at in their spiritual journey. Difficult theological concepts or Christian jargon could well be a barrier for people in the bottom half of the map who do not have a relationship with Christ or have little understanding of the Christian faith. Whereas receiving repeated Gospel messages would not help a Christian sports person (top half of the map) grow as quickly as they could compared too if they were taught well in Biblical principles plus given ministry opportunities to develop their gifting, calling and Christian character. Therefore presentations and programmes should seek to match the spiritual understanding of participants so as to truly engage effectively with sportspeople in their spiritual journey.

**b) The Sport in Ministry Personal Approach.**

Whilst the Quadrant approach is helpful in general terms when considering Christian participation in sport with a view for intentional mission engagement some people may wish to take it further i.e. Personalise their transformational participation and engagement with sport and explore a possible mission calling to the world of sport. Therefore the map can be helpful

when exploring further questions of personal mission calling, effective engagement with sportspeople and possible strategic approaches in sports mission.

An initial application question might well be **'Where would you locate yourself on the Map?'** In answering this question the potential participant does a sporting assessment of their involvement in sport i.e. spectator, novice, recreation, player, elite or high profile level plus a spiritual assessment of where they are in their relationship to Christ. Thus as a result of answering these questions honestly the potential participant assesses their own God given gifting, ability and mindset as well as acceptance level amongst other sportspeople. Following this personal assessment the potential participant can mark on the map where they are and this then provides visual foundation point for answering other mission questions.

The next possible question to consider is more focused on God given calling and passion as it seeks to address the issue of mission 'target group' that the potential participant is seeking to reach out too. Therefore the potential participant may ask **'Where on the Map are the people you want to be involved with or reach out to for transformation?'** In answering this question it may be necessary to shade in an area of the map and shade in a number of areas due to differing groups of focus for the potential participant. These shaded areas could be very long i.e. covering a broad range of levels of spiritual understanding of Christ, or very wide i.e. in that a breadth of sporting standards are covered or very small focused shaded area e.g. outreach to un-churched novices. Whatever area is drawn in the map it will provide a visual picture of God given calling and passion for the potential sports participant.

Another question that would naturally follow from the identification of a particular target people group within the sports culture spectrum could be **'What are the needs and interests of this particular group you want to bring transformation to?'** In answering this question, greater understanding of this people group can be developed by the potential participant in order that engagement with this people group could be done from a position of knowledge and empathy. In seeking to understand the needs and interests of the people group, engagement can be more effective as either the activity of connection or sharing has a greater chance of being relevant to the receiver. E.g. the needs and interests of a novice un-churched sportsperson would be very different from a believing high profile player. A novice un-churched sportsperson could appreciate sports coaching and equipment whereas the high profile Christian player may want friendship and support in maintaining their witness under the glare and pressure of the media. Assessing needs and interests will help in developing effective strategies for engagement.

In terms of strategizing about effective approaches in mission to the chosen sportspeople group, the following question may be helpful **'What do you need to do to be more effective in integrating (incarnating principle as modelled by Christ and taught by the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23) with the group you seek to bring transformation to?'** The response to this question might be very practical e.g. wearing the colours of the fans you are reaching out to, acquiring coaching badges to help novices in their sport etc or the response to this question might be an attitude change e.g. Be less competitive with recreational players, look for ways to serve elite players etc. The focus in answering this question is to look to a) reduce the barriers and b) build bridges between the potential participant and people group.

Ongoing questions of evaluation about effective engagement might be ***'Has the sports activity you are involved with matched the ability level of the participants?'*** and ***'What adjustments will you have to make to increase or reduce the level of difficulty to prevent boredom or anxiety?'*** In answering these evaluation questions, the hope is to keep reducing barriers and to keep building bridges for transformation in order that the potential participant is truly incarnated and effective amongst the people group of their calling.

Through this process of personal questioning the desire is to make Christian participation in sport effective, through being rooted in Biblical values and community. The potential participant is responsible for the delivery of mission activity within the sports culture in order that sport is kept as 'sport' because sport can be at risk through putting it down or promoting it too much. In treating sport with a combination of a balanced perspective and a sense of integrity, transformation within individuals and even in the wider sports sub cultures may well be possible through effective engagement by Christians.

The Sports Cluster of 'Forum for Change' can help sporty Christians be more effective in their engagement with the sports culture. The hope is that by sharing experiences, models and paradigms, Christian engagement with sport and wider culture will be more transformational.

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