

What is so special about sport?

Introduction

Few modern phenomena elicit such intense emotional bonding as sport, often dominating the media and it would be almost impossible to overestimate the impact of sport in modern society. Other things such as art, science, agriculture, business may make larger contributions to civilisation but rarely do these other enterprises enter into daily discussion and lay claim to basic loyalties in the way sport does¹. One striking development in sport around the world in recent years has been the increased visible engagement of Christians (evangelicals in particular) and churches both in participating and being vocal about their faith. This is not a recent phenomenon but the question of why should there be a Christian focus on sport is important to consider if a solid platform is to be in place for relevant effective future church transformational engagement with the sports culture.

It is recognised that there are many good and worthwhile activities e.g. art, music, drama, business, medical professions etc that Christians can participate in and as a result of this participation develop transformational mission strategies. Therefore the following seeks to address the question of why should sport be seen as different, special or even unique compared to the examples of many other worthwhile claims and activities for Christian participation.

a) Sport can be seen as a universal language

Sport is an anthropological universal as it is found in some form in every culture and society. Sport can transcend economic, race social, political, language, and religious barriers thus promoting inter-culture dialogue, strengthened interaction and enhanced co-operation. Sport is played everywhere and increasingly being recognised as a language of movement by governments and world organisations. Sport to one degree or another seems to enjoy universal appeal. Just in one sport alone, football the English Premier League has coverage available in 199 territories reaching 586 million homes around the world.² Many Christians and churches have found in their experiences around the world that cultural barriers have been broken down and connections have been made through participating in sport.

b) Sport can be seen as relevant to contemporary culture

Sport permeates all levels of contemporary society as it fulfils a number of functions e.g. leisure time activity, achievement, mode of self-display/performance or for a social gathering. In the West, the leisure culture is increasingly dominating economic activity and time. The emergence of a leisure ethic out of a work ethic is an alternative that is being chosen by many in contemporary society.³ The European Sports Conference Charter describes sport as an inalienable right of each person; therefore it can be a very powerful social tool through its inclusivity, person-centred focus and capacity to mobilize people. The growth, variety and

¹ Baum G and Coleman J (eds), *Sport*. Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1989, p. 1.

² www.thefa.com website

³ Garner, J (ed), *Recreation and Sports Ministry: Impacting Post-modern Culture*. Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2003.p. 4-5, identifies a Gallop poll that recorded 90% of Americans watch, read or participate in sports once a month and 70% once a week.

diversity of people attracted to be involved in a transformational engagement agenda in sport is a testimony of this.

c) Sport can be seen as a microcosm of life

Sport often reflects the culture in which it is played⁴ hence lessons learnt from sport could be transferred to wider society and back again. The environment of sport can help reveal and shape character, be a place of instruction in glory and disappointment as sport covers many of the emotions found in the collective and individual challenges of life. Priceless and foundational skills can be attained through the sports experience especially amongst children thus sport can provide an environment for whole life valuing training. Community sport educational initiatives have a proven track record of success in heightening self-esteem, motivation, focus among young people and in driving literacy, numeracy and the popularity of vocational training. Additionally sport can play its role in helping to make a contribution on the issues of health, education and social inclusion. There are now many examples of Christians delivering educational initiatives through football all around the world in different cultural settings that are making a difference for good in people's lives.

d) Sport can be seen as a medium or vehicle to communicate a message

Sport is an effective communication channel as a multi dimensional, catalyst to compliment or create opportunities for other activities. The Apostle Paul recognized these qualities of sport and used it to communicate examples of spiritual disciplines that are highlighted in the sporting world. Paul could see parallels between Christianity and sport that meant Christians could take lessons from sporting life and apply it to the Christian lifestyle. Stuart Weir notes that "Paul used the experience of the sportsman to motivate his readers to commitment to a higher cause... Paul and other New Testament writers recognized sport as an integral part of the society of their day and therefore saw it as an obvious source of imagery in describing the Christian faith."⁵ This approach continues today as the Christian Church seeks to communicate truth through the medium of sport.

e) Sport can be seen as an International Social Phenomenon

Sport is now a social phenomenon; an intricate part of people's lives as it is connected to major spheres of social life such as family, education and even religion.⁶ It can have the power to divide a city or unite a nation, realize dreams or break hearts. Football as only one sport is a massive community as it the national sport in the majority of countries and followed by every country. The 208 member countries contain over 265 million male and female players in addition to 5 million referees and officials. The 2006 FIFA World Cup Final attracted more than 600 million people tuning in to watch at least part of the match.⁷ The sporting family is ambitious to be perceived as a responsible industry that does make a positive contribution to

⁴ Coleman, J, "Sport and the Contradictions of Society." *International Journal for Theology* 5, 205: (1985), p. 21, (e.g. Genesis 1:26 mandate).

⁵ Weir S, *What the Book says about Sport*. Oxford: Bible Reading Fellowship, 2000, pp. 16-17.

⁶ Coakley, J, J, *Sport in Society: Issues and Controversies*. Fifth Edition. St.Louis: Mosby, 1994, pp 5-6.

⁷ www.thefa.com website

its local communities, a contribution to goes beyond the sporting entertainment it provides. The Christian church can play its role around the world in this international movement.

f) Sport can be seen as a fun, healthy and holistic activity

Sport can lead to friendships as relationships seem to come easy when something as powerful as sport holds people together. It is special in that it does have a 'feel good' factor and very few activities claim to offer as much excitement as sport does. Therefore participation can be viewed as part of a healthy, wholesome and balanced life. The unity that sport brings can be both a core value and the experience of Christians who participate in sport.

Therefore in view of this massive cultural package that is sport, the church and Christians have a potential opportunity to make a significant impact for good in the sports culture and the wider world through participation and effective engagement. Some of the six reasons mentioned above individually might be sufficient to encourage Christian participant in sport but when considered as a whole, the social reasons for special focused church engagement seem compelling. Whilst this may be a compelling motive to establish common ground between sport and the Christian church further understanding of what is the sports culture is still needed before this engagement can be effective and this can be discussed within this sport cluster of 'Forum for Change'.

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(Thanks to the International Sports Coalition and the teachers of the International Sports Leadership School of South Africa for helping shape my thinking).