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## **In Praise of Folly: Sport as Play 1**

This paper considers the relationship between Christianity and sport under three headings, each broadly representing a different era in the relationship between religion and leisure: 'puritanism', 'muscular Christianity' and 'sports evangelism'. It argues that each has led to impoverished experiences and understandings of sport. The first tended to condemn sport, along with other leisure activities; the second, exemplified by 'Muscular Christianity', tended to instrumentalise sport for moral gains, with mixed results; and the third, labelled 'Sportianity' by some commentators, has attempted to combine evangelism and the values of modern sport in ways that have arguably compromised both. The paper argues that a missing ingredient in each case is 'play' – a constituent element of any definition of sport which has so often been lost. It concludes with some practical and theological reflections on putting play back into sport.

'A man who is not sometimes a fool is always one', wrote a Victorian Methodist, in one of the period's more provocative demands for play. 2 Christianity and the world had something in common: they were both too serious – still groaning under the masochistic burdens of a Protestant work ethic, rising early and 'redeeming the time', but doing so in a way that somehow flattered man not God. Asceticism was not about humility: it was all about pride. The 1860s and '70s were a time of remarkable adjustment in the Christian world, as the 'old rigour' came under attack and venerated Puritans such as Richard Baxter were cut down to size. Was pleasure always to be feared? Is leisure always a sign of carnality? Might there not be more danger in an ethic of control than a spirit of freedom? A new generation of evangelical leaders self-consciously broke out of the puritan mould, flouting the shibboleths of their youth and seeking to undo generations of 'negative morality' by taking a bold stance on leisure. In this, they anticipated the views of modern scholars such as Natalie Zemon Davis and Charles Taylor who have identified the social and religious costs of puritan rigour. Protestant regimes, noted Zemon Davis, 'stamped out playfulness', finding no room for the 'carnavalesque'. They had no equivalent to the playful 'inversion rituals' which did so much to integrate medieval society: days of sanctioned levity in which the social hierarchy and social decencies were temporarily reversed. 3 Taylor argued similarly in *A Secular Age* (2007), identifying the 'anti-festive' tendencies of Protestant reform as a major element in the secularisation of the West – a point I have made on a smaller canvas in *The Problem of Pleasure*. 4 When Christian regimes set their faces against even innocent pleasures, they suffer along with those whom they subject to their rigour. Hearts rebel from the discipline and churches acquire a reputation for joyless severity. 'Satan fell by the force of gravity', wrote G K Chesterton. 5 So perhaps did the church.

In this article I want to sketch an alternative model of Christian freedom in relation to sport, arguing that, while modern attitudes rightly recoil from the puritan stance of discipline and hostility, they continue to reproduce aspects of it, diminishing both Christianity and sport. I will argue that the two approaches that have replaced puritanism in the modern church, 'muscular Christianity' and 'sports evangelism', have each perpetuated a highly instrumentalised and pragmatic attitude to sport, which continues to impoverish Christian engagement with it. The urge to 'redeem' sport for the building of character or the spreading

of the gospel has tended to be unsuccessful and, while I would applaud the desire to infuse Christian values into it, my contention is that the way to do so is to recover it as play. Sport has been asked to achieve too much by moralists, educationists and evangelists. My suggestion is that it can only rise to its potential by losing some of its crushing responsibilities. Like a struggling competitor who suddenly finds her game by forgetting the prize and enjoying the contest, I want to commend sport on its own terms – as a thing of beauty, a gift.

## ‘Traditions of the Elders’: The Puritan Stance

The puritan stance has a long history, springing from an intuitive sense that sport and faith are contesting the same psychological ground: that the communal excitements and the vicarious loyalties of sport are too intrinsically religious to be treated with anything less than suspicion. The tantalising drama of competition and the seductive power of the crowd positively invite ‘spiritual’ interpretations – indeed it can be argued that sport provides one of the clearest examples of Durkheim’s concept of ‘collective effervescence’, the giddy mental energy from which the sociologist believed all religion to have emerged. <sup>6</sup> Augustine wrote of the insidious powers of the Roman games in his *Confessions*, describing them as capable of overcoming the staunchest resistance and ‘wound[ing]’ the ‘soul’. <sup>7</sup> Tertullian condemned Christian involvement in the ‘spectacles’ even more forcefully, arguing that they cannot be enjoyed without ‘spiritual agitation’. Christians were not immune to the idolatry of the amphitheatre. <sup>8</sup> Although the violence of the ancient games distinguished them from modern sports, and gladiatorial combat was a category of its own, classical Christian perspectives are eerily contemporary in identifying the soul-absorbing propensities of sport. In the fifth century Cassiodorus, Christian secretary to Emperor Theodosius, wrote of the partisanship of the Hippodrome in terms that could apply to many a football crowd:

The spectacle drives out sound morality and invites childish factiousness, it banishes honesty and it is an unflinching source of riots... Green takes the lead and half the crowd is plunged into gloom. Blue passes him, and a great mass of citizens suffer the torments of the damned. They cheer wildly with no useful result; they suffer nothing but are cut to the heart. <sup>9</sup>

I am not sure if there is a better description of the competition-by-proxy that is the life of the sports fan: the thrilling yet disempowering experience of living by the crumbs that fall from the professional’s table. This was one reason why Christians opposed benign as well as brutal sports: each was susceptible to idolatry; each invited vicarious trust of a kind that should be reserved for Christ.

Opposition to the very different Roman and Greek sporting cultures became central to Christian identity and the ending of these traditions was a symbol of Christendom’s emergence. In AD 404 gladiatorial combat was finally banned by Emperor Honorius after a monk was killed by spectators when he tried to end one of the contests. <sup>10</sup> The Olympic Games were finally abolished some time between AD 392 and AD 408 by the decree of the Roman Emperor after more than 1000 years of continuous history – condemned as pagan religious rites. <sup>11</sup>

Medieval sports such as *le jeu de paume* and football’s various ancestors lacked the gore and the frenzied crowds of the ancient games but it was nevertheless a major point of reproach for

early Protestants how easily Catholicism had tolerated these thinly-veiled 'idols'. In the confessional arms race of the early modern period, hostility to pleasure and mindless dissipation became a badge of honour as Puritans and Pietists, Jesuits and Jansenists, competed for the moral high ground. Manuals of casuistry laboured over the finer details of leisure time – a concept that the influential Puritan, Richard Baxter, suggested was virtually alien to the true Christian. <sup>12</sup> Bunyan's austere pilgrim became a model of Christian sanctity, while High Church holiness traditions established an equally trenchant position on pleasure and wasted time. As Max Weber wrote in his classic work on *The Protestant Ethic*, 'asceticism descended like a frost on the life of "Merrie old England"', forcing 'worldly merriment' to the margins of society and casting suspicion on even the gentlest of festivities. <sup>13</sup>

It is often assumed that the evangelical revival loosened the reins, establishing a link between 'happiness' and 'holiness' and appealing to the 'affections' as well as the intellect. But in many ways it upped the ante: a religion that appealed to the emotions would be jealous of its rivals. Conversion narratives nearly always charted a journey from worldly dissipation to sobriety and sanctity, and many evangelicals, like Bunyan, wrote of a moment of conviction in the very act of sporting endeavour. The continuing association of laxer Catholic and Anglican traditions with worldly amusements such as racing and boxing encouraged an attitude of stern separation. By the early nineteenth century it was unofficial evangelical orthodoxy that a person's pleasures were the surest test of their spirituality. Wilberforce thought a reluctance to discountenance the theatre was reason enough to doubt whether a person was truly converted; asked if it would be right to disobey a parent who intended to take a child to the theatre, Wilberforce responded that, on such an occasion, disobedience was a Christian duty. By the third decade of the nineteenth century, this outlook had been institutionalised into a war on the pleasures and pastimes of England. <sup>14</sup>

As centuries-old sporting traditions came to an abrupt end in the 1830s and '40s, and evangelical attitudes passed into British law, few and brave were the voices of dissent. Could Wilberforce and Wesley, any more than Baxter and Bunyan, possibly be wrong on this great matter of pleasure? The answer, according to young mavericks such as Edward Irving and Samuel Earnshaw, was 'yes'. While few doubted that sports and their intoxicating 'accessories' could beguile the soul, the new suspicion was that the religious remedy was more dangerous than the disease: that opposition to sport destroyed a theology of grace, rather than preserved it – inventing sins rather than rooting them out. Puritanism was substituting human law for divine, establishing new 'doctrines' of separation and erecting barriers between popular sentiment and Christian faith in the process. As Earnshaw contended, 'The strongest anathemas and denunciations occur just where the doctrine enunciated contains the least portion of scripture-obviousness, and the greatest portion of human reasoning and syllogism.' Earnshaw went as far as to suggest that many of the giants of the Christian tradition had in truth been preparing 'a great apostasy' by fixing the principle in the popular mind that Christianity is against 'games and amusements' – that 'religious people' should not, 'on any account, be seen to be present at, or to take any part in, a public exhibition of athletic sports'. These 'traditions of the elders' were driving young people away and allowing faith to lapse into pharisaism. It was time for a revolution. <sup>15</sup>

The puritan stance was not without logic, as I have suggested. Faced with the callous brutality of the Roman arena, the casual bloodletting of a host of traditional 'sports', and the gravitational force of the sporting crowd, it is easy to see why a policy of avoidance was

adopted. Sports are natural competitors for time, money, affection. The danger, however, was in the institutionalisation of a mindset that refused to discern between cricket and cockfighting, gin-palaces and the Crystal Palace. Outsiders were baffled by the severity, and biographies of Christians indicate the anxiety caused by regimes that fretted over novel-reading or the legitimacy of Sunday walks. Theologically, the notion that the believer is locked in a zero-sum game with his or her pleasures had the effect of almost sanctifying the activity in question: casting it centre-stage in the cosmic drama even as it was attacked. Like Satan in *Paradise Lost*, it got all the best lines. Instead of minimising pleasure the puritan approach flatters it, turning it into public enemy number one, and reducing Christian social policy to a series of battles over leisure. Such was the case in the 1850s when governments could be brought to their knees for transgressing the laws of evangelical sabbatarianism, and when the scions of evangelical homes often broke away from the tradition on no other grounds than its stifling oppressiveness. When a young Edmund Gosse was sent by his stepmother 'to play' with some neighbouring children, he suddenly realised that he 'had not the faintest idea how to "play"'. <sup>16</sup> His stern upbringing was supposed to shield him from ungodliness but a web of prohibitions simply acted as a time bomb for his emotional disenchantment. The process was identified more widely by the great Scottish preacher, Thomas Chalmers, who contended that the risks of antinomianism were less dangerous to Christian integrity than the temptations of legalism. A religiosity that troubles the conscience over trifles creates a 'barren' gospel, which would provoke rebellion. Evangelicals needed to know that the pharisaic tendency lay with them; that many of their holiest ordinances were human constructions. <sup>17</sup> Muscular Christianity was born in the reaction.

## Muscular Christianity

Charles Kingsley and Thomas Hughes, whose writings first inspired the term 'muscular Christianity', considered the evangelical determination to 'write poison on all pleasure' <sup>18</sup> nothing less than blasphemous. The pastoral disaster of the war on pleasure provided *carte blanche* for a rehabilitation of the body as a vehicle of virtue. The muscular Christians brought an evangelical ardour to their unevangelical task. Kingsley articulated his mission in terms of redeeming 'Esau' – the honest man of the fields, tricked out of his birthright by the slippery Jacobs of the establishment. He sought not to modify the prevailing Christian ethic so much as reverse it: turning cathedrals into places for winter walks, and turning games into the vernacular of an embodied Christianity. 'Through sport,' he contended in his infamous dispute with John Henry Newman,

boys acquire virtues which no books can give them; not merely daring and endurance, but, better still, temper, self-restraint, fairness, honour, unenvious approbation of another's success, and all that 'give and take' of life which stand a man in good stead when he goes forth into the world, and without which, indeed, his success is always maimed and partial. <sup>19</sup>

The set-text was Thomas Hughes's *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (1857), which preached a gospel of teamwork and trust through the sacred medium of play: the 'glorious perils' of tree-climbing; the bracing savagery of rugby football; the hushed tensions of 'the unselfish game' – also known as cricket. Reflecting the incarnational turn in contemporary theology, this was a moral education that started in the earth and the sinews and worked upwards. It was Christianity lived, not preached, and while initially mocked as 'muscularity', it more than held its own in a Victorian world that was coming to the startling 'conviction that the

visible world exists'. 20 The fictional vision of the 1850s became the reality of the public schools of the 1860s and '70s, and from there the physical gospel entered 'the religious world.' Football clubs as distinguished as Aston Villa, Liverpool and Everton owe their existence to this pastoral revolution. Formerly sceptical YMCAs and young people's guilds modified muscular Christianity for an evangelical world still true to its 'conversionist' roots, but by the 1890s it was getting hard to distinguish the old gospel of rescue from the new soteriology of play. In the space of three decades, sport passed from feared enemy to trusted ally in the Christian mission, before finally *becoming* the Christian mission in some cases. From a position in the 1870s when games were extolled as a moral tonic and an opportunity for Christian witness, they grew to a status of virtual parity – decisively eclipsing gospel imperatives in a variety of Christian contexts. So confident were some Christian leaders in the powers of play, they either relaxed the old conversionist language or simply transferred it onto sport. 21

When Thomas Chalmers urged in 1818 that only a 'new affection' for Christ could 'expel' the 'old' affections of money, pleasure or power, his sermon established some of the basic vocabulary of the evangelical movement. But in the 1880s and '90s this very notion of expelling affections was translated onto sport, which found itself acting as a mediator between a dark world of urban vice and the green uplands of virtue. As the Bishop of Manchester advised the city's YMCA in 1883:

if you have to contend with the devil of impurity in your soul, do not fight directly against it, but try to get hold of some other object that is pure and worthy. ... If you can get your minds and bodies possessed with worthy aims and healthy exercise, I think you will have a very great safeguard to keep you pure, even in the midst of evil. 22

The institutions that had first condemned the spiritual poverty of muscular Christianity now offered a version of it; and a movement that was born in reaction to puritanism now offered a new puritanism of physical discipline, temperance and self-control. Indeed the Kingsleian remedy for sexual temptation was arguably an extension of Richard Baxter's age-old prescription: 'Work hard in your calling'. 23

In muscular Christianity play became work, and the language of 'expelling the devil of impurity' echoed the kind of asceticism that Kingsley and Hughes claimed to abhor. Sport was instrumentalised. Just as Edmund Gosse grew up resenting his father's antipathy to play, children brought up on muscular Christianity tired of its didacticism. Muscular Christianity took its place among the 'priggish clichés' that the Brideshead generation rejected with such contempt after the First World War. One writer recalled the Victorian regime in which his father 'used to give us odd little old-fashioned books to read, of an improving kind, like *Philosophy in Sport*, where the poor boy cannot even throw a stone without having the principles of the parabola explained to him, with odious diagrams'. 24 In the 1920s, Stephen Spender complained of similar advice from his father: 'If I had to play football, he impressed on me that this was to harden the tissues of my character'. 25

Not only had muscular Christianity quietly subverted the Christian gospel in organisations like the YMCA, it failed to create Christian gentlemen in the manner hoped. A series of literary exposés demonstrated the dangers implicit in assuming that good athletes make good leaders. 26 At its best, it produced a kind of cool Stoicism – an ability to face danger with equanimity; at its worst, it simply rewarded the strong. As a universal vernacular, designed to

embrace the weak as well as the physically able, it spectacularly failed, as J A Mangan's pioneering work on Victorian athleticism demonstrates. <sup>27</sup> Muscular Christianity was perhaps an inevitable reaction to the enduring dualism of the Christian mind but it was far less liberated than it claimed to be. Instead of resolving the tension between physicality and spirituality, it simply inverted it – deifying the physical and demonising 'pietistic' retreat. By making physicality the source of moral excellence, muscular Christianity sold both sport and Christianity short. Play, like prayer, was for weaklings.

## Home Runs for the Lord: From Sports Evangelism to Sportianity

If muscular Christianity tried to find salvation *in* sport, 'sports evangelism' would offer salvation *from* it. Rather than claiming that there is any salvific quality in physical health and temperance, as per the Kingsleian creed, sports evangelism seeks to utilise sport as the best available platform for 'reaching' the unconverted. In its celebration of athletic achievement and lionising of high performers, it certainly resembles muscular Christianity but the two impulses remain distinct. Hughes and Kingsley were committed to a kind of theological universalism that invited everyone to the feast via the accessible medium of action; sports evangelism remains sharply conversionist: adopting the male idiom of competition and channelling it back into an often aggressive style of 'witness'. Largely a phenomenon of the USA, sports evangelism is most at home in the fundamentalist colleges that scorned the first wave of the sporting revolution in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries but joined the party after the Second World War. Whereas British evangelicals have tended either to adopt moderated versions of muscular Christianity or to employ sport more cautiously in the wake of muscular Christianity's failings, American sports evangelism has retained a strongly fundamentalist pedigree, and it is this tradition that raises the most pressing issues.

The icons of sports evangelism are C T Studd, the cricketer-turned-missionary of the late nineteenth century; Eric Liddell the Scottish rugby player and heroic Olympian of the 1924 games who, like Studd, became a missionary; and, most characteristically if not quite so famously, Billy Sunday, the baseball-player-turned-evangelist whose berating of backsliders and theatrical portrayal of conversion as 'sliding into base' entered the evangelical culture. Figures like Sunday became more than comforting status symbols for an embattled conservatism: they set the tone. As Shirl Hoffman writes: 'It may not be an exaggeration to say that sport came to the defence of fundamentalism.' <sup>28</sup> Packed tent meetings, dramatic testimonies, and brilliant use of the ready-made constituency of sport helped fundamentalists to recover some of the confidence of the Moody and Sankey era. As the principle was institutionalised in the big college football teams, sports evangelism demonstrated that conservative Christianity was here to stay in the dizzying world of secular competition – and might just convert it.

In one sense, the mission succeeded. From a situation in 1900 when few evangelicals would associate with the brutality of the gridiron or the profanity of the baseball diamond, the infiltration of American sports has been remarkable. Super Bowls <sup>29</sup> in which *both* coaches ascribe their success in the sport to God are not unknown, and the sight of biblical verses painted on cheeks beneath helmet cages is familiar to any follower of American football. One sportswriter claimed that so many Christians had invaded big-time sports that when he set out to select an 'All-Religious Team' and an 'All-Heathen Team' to compete in an imaginary

'Christians vs Lions Bowl' he could not find enough 'genuine heathens' to field a squad! <sup>30</sup> In another sense, sports evangelism has been a disaster: offering a televised parody of evangelical piety as personal development plan, mocking the humbler Christian virtues and, most strikingly of all, representing Jesus Christ as an infinitely partial deity who delights in the glory of champions.

The aspirations of sports evangelism are laudable and my criticisms do not apply to individuals who are seeking to leaven the world of sport with a discerning dissidence. <sup>31</sup> I am, however, referring to the tone and culture of sports evangelism as it has evolved primarily in the United States and worked its way into popular evangelicalism via figures such as Billy Sunday and, more recently, the influential preacher and writer, Mark Driscoll. Although the conversionist instincts of sports evangelism remain at odds with the Esau-affirming culture of muscular Christianity, there is a comparable tendency to take sport on its own terms, and to allow those terms to dictate the Christian message.

Studd and Liddell, of course, gave up high-level competition for the obscurity of mission, but the impulse of sports evangelism has been to try to have its cake and eat it – to claim spiritual sanctity while glorying in terrestrial victory. The tendency is visible in the way such figures are presented to the secular world. Studd's biography describes him as *Cricketer and Pioneer*, though he was 'a serious cricketer for perhaps five years, and a missionary for forty-five.' <sup>32</sup> More problematically, the faith of the sports evangelist often sounds like a glorified form of sports psychology - a kind of indomitable life-force, driving the athlete to victory. The Eric Liddell of *Chariots of Fire* reflects this tendency, sometimes sounding almost Kantian in extolling the strength 'within'. The initial impression is of humility but the message is not far away from the idea that 'God helps those who help themselves.' 'If you commit yourself to the love of Christ, then that is how you run a straight race,' Liddell urges a rain-soaked crowd after another resounding victory. 'Spirituality is the fuel of the victorious athlete, and God is 'honoured' by the victory.' Spirituality is the fuel of the athlete. Later in the film, prophetic hope hovers tantalisingly between providing perspective on the vanity of international competition and actually underwriting victory: 'they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and be not weary,' Liddell urges from the pulpit amid the maelstrom of the Games. Commentators have alluded to the Pelagian implications of the film, with the apparent moral that he who honours God by refusing to run on the Sabbath will be honoured with a gold medal, but I think the narrative is more confused than that: like a great deal of sports evangelism, it preaches a mixed message, oscillating between the human and divine sources of success, blending the natural and the spiritual *agon*.

*Chariots of Fire's* stirring fusion of religious faith and a Thatcherite work ethic is strongly redolent of what the American journalist, Frank Deford, termed 'Sportianity' – a phenomenon extensively critiqued in Hoffman's recent polemic, *Good Game: Christianity and the Culture of Sports*. <sup>33</sup> Sportianity is the attempt to preach a religion of grace from a platform of victory; to preach poverty of spirit through a medium of fist-pumping bravado; to commend the universality of Christian faith via the parochialism of sport. It is the assumption that the world beats to the rhythms of the Dallas Cowboys or the New York Yankees and that the church must too. Instead of subverting the sporting metaphor, like Paul – contrasting sport's 'corruptible' with Christianity's 'incorruptible' crown <sup>34</sup> – Sportianity dwells in the medium, with damaging consequences. As Hoffman writes in one of his livelier passages:

'Sportianity' is a concoction of triumphal evangelism blended with worldly Darwinian competition and crafted to appeal to those for whom a love of athletics frames their lives. It combines locker room slogans, Old Testament allusions to religious wars, athletically slanted doctrines of assertiveness and sacrifice and a cult of masculinity, backed up by cherry-picked Bible verses pre-screened to ensure they don't conflict with sport's reigning orthodoxies. The fundamentals of 'sportianity' have been rationalized, systematized and vigorously promulgated by sport-evangelism organizations. It is taught with remarkable consistency to high school, college and professional athletes. 'Sportianity' also explains the meaning of sports to thousands of ministers, laypeople and the religious press. In fact, there are few alternative systems of thinking about sports and faith in the evangelical community. 35

The capacity of Sportianity for self-delusion about motives and integrity was captured by a representative from a sports evangelism organisation, who explained that the Christian athlete 'is living by a different set of rules, not playing by a different set of rules' – suggesting that most of the excesses of modern sports can be justified under the divine imperative of playing to win.

Rather than tempering the ravages of the win-at-all-costs mentality, Sportianity revels in it. The quoted figure cited the career of Mike Singletary, a former star on the Chicago Bears and more recently coach of the San Francisco 49ers, noting that he was a mild-mannered person in the pulpit, 'but he's broken 13 helmets on the playing field and he will tell you that he plays football to the best of his ability because Christ wants him to.' Hoffman quotes another footballer who explains that, 'Even though I am a Christian, I can play a rough brand of football. In fact, as a Christian, I ought to play an ever rougher brand than anyone else.' Citing case studies on prominent Christian coaches, Hoffman laments that the very individuals who preached 'purity' to football, 'willingly stretched and broke the rules to win, while defending the game as a builder of good character'. 36 He provides endless examples of sharp practice, violence and outright scandal in Christian colleges and among pious athletes, though his sternest observations are reserved for those who consider that God is somehow honoured by fingers pointed upwards during raucous victory celebrations or testimonies that attribute last-minute triumphs to divine blessing. Responding to the view that 'people take notice' when a well-known sportsman declares his faith, Hoffman weighs the costs:

The dynamics of selling Christ are not much different than the dynamics of selling basketball shoes. The celebrity pitching the gospel, like the celebrity pitching athletic shoes, must embody an attractive image, and in the athletic world this means that he or she must be a winner. Physically attractive, successful, wealthy, nationally acclaimed athletes are in demand by evangelism groups, stumbling, error-prone, marginal players are not, even though they may be far superior models of the Christian life. ... sport evangelism is fundamentally about image. 37

Even if we allow that Hoffman's controversialist approach, cataloguing crises and failures, possibly exaggerates the problems of sports evangelism, his argument rings true. Outside of America we have seen proudly Christian cricketers worryingly conversant in the dark arts of 'sledging' and 'mental disintegration', and no less susceptible to financial corruption than their 'secular' counterparts.



The point I would wish to add to Hoffman's survey is the tendency of sporting bombast to enter the churches as a kind of *lingua franca* of mission, justified on the grounds that Christianity has always erred on the side of femininity. Mark Driscoll's *Vintage Jesus* (2008) demonstrates how easily the sporting ethos can pass from metaphor to the substance of popular theology. <sup>38</sup> Having complained that every generation remakes God in its own image, <sup>39</sup> Driscoll apparently succumbs to the same temptation, drawing an ultra-masculine Christ straight from the grittiest urban playing fields. Rebukes to the Pharisees are re-written in a form of locker-room badinage, and the Catholic Jesus of his Sunday school education is mocked for 'weird[ness]' and femininity. Driscoll writes that

[This] Jesus seemed downright freakish, definitely not the kind of guy you'd want on your baseball team because he'd never have the guts to slide hard into second to break up a double play or throw inside to a batter to back him off the plate. Rather, he'd prefer to pick flowers in the outfield and daydream about fluffy sheep while praying for his enemies and keeping his emotions under control. The Gospel of Mark revealed a Jesus who was antithetical to the 'gentle Jesus, meek and mild' sung about in Wesley's famous hymn. The portrait of Mark agrees more easily with that of former-major-league-baseball-player-turned-evangelist Billy Sunday who said, 'Jesus was the greatest scrapper who ever lived'. <sup>40</sup>

Driscoll's paraphrase adopts an idiom that can only be likened to 'trash talking', allowing sexual insults and abusive repartee to flow from Jesus' lips. <sup>41</sup> This goes beyond the usual parameters of sports evangelism, no doubt, but the sentiments stem from a similar conviction that sport represents a reality to which Christianity must bend in order to cut it among the young. Driscoll's attempt to repackage Christianity for 'tough men' recalls muscular Christianity at its least plausible and demonstrates where sports evangelism can lead when sporting machismo is embraced uncritically. Driscoll's 'Leadership lessons from baseball' appear to substantiate Hoffman's concerns about Sportianity's Darwinian proclivities, with such bold advice as 'Cut underperforming, overpaid veterans', 'pay for big-name, proven free agents', and 'get a great general manager'. <sup>42</sup> Like the bishop who patronised a group of schoolboys by assuming they all supported Manchester United, sports evangelism can be too sure of its idiom, too slow to see its contradictions.

## **Sport as Play: A Model of Christian Freedom**

If the obvious criticism of both muscular Christianity and Sportianity is that they profane the Christian gospel, a subtler problem is the way in which they take something away from sport: forcing it (however unsuccessfully) into an agenda of moralisation or proselytism. Both are perhaps too mired in their seriousness to achieve what they aspire to. 'Nothing funny ever happens on a football field', said the legendary Dallas Cowboys coach and prominent Christian, Tom Landry. This is precisely the problem! Christians may wince when Bill Shankly declares football more important than life or death, or when Vince Lombardi declares that winning is 'the only thing', but these attitudes are the clear descendants of muscular Christianity and are alive and well in the statistic-hungry universe of Sportianity. The suffocating seriousness of both attitudes reminds me of medieval artists who felt that the only worthy subjects of their skills were 'sacred' scenes, endlessly repeated, and that still lifes or landscapes were somehow beneath them. Art so 'sacred', so constrained, almost ceased to be art.

Like the Dutch Masters who boldly proclaimed the holiness of the ordinary, I think there is great need for a freer and less encumbered sporting 'aesthetic'. While this would not be uncritical of ethical blindspots in modern competition, it would help to reduce them by taking sport less seriously. As Hoffman observes, most of the violence and dishonesty in sport comes from over-conforming to the competitive ethos – an inability to grasp the boundedness, the self-defined quality of the sporting encounter. Sometimes this means simply putting the contest and its emotions into perspective; sometimes it would mean walking away from a sport in which such an approach becomes untenable. My concern is not primarily the ethical implications of sport, however, but our ability to appreciate it as a thing in itself. If something is worth doing, it has an intrinsic merit quite apart from its moral or evangelistic potential. Instead of seeing sport as an opportunity *for* witness, I would like to commend it *as* witness: an expression and embodiment of Christian freedom.

Each of the positions I have sketched find their analogues in *Chariots of Fire*, and so does a fourth: the swashbuckling figure of Lord Lindsay whose elegant virtues subtly highlight the shortcomings of the others. In Jennie Liddell, Eric's devout sister, we find the personification of the puritan stance: that every hour spent running is an hour taken from God; in the smouldering energies of Harold Abrahams, and the urge to justify himself socially and spiritually, we find a model of muscular Christianity. Abrahams is Jewish but his turning of sporting achievement into a spiritual quest, and his disappointment that success did not bring happiness and security, recalls the utopianism of muscular Christianity, of which the modern Olympic movement is a direct descendant. <sup>43</sup> Meanwhile, Liddell (in the film, though not perhaps in real life) embodies the ambiguities of sports evangelism: the tension between evangelical duty and the thrill of running, and the attempt to resolve them by justifying the latter as a form of worship. Whether or not Liddell did 'feel God's pleasure' when he ran, the film's attempt to spiritualise the intoxication of competition is suggestive of one of the least convincing aspects of sports evangelism: the nagging sense that a good scrap on the tennis court cannot be described as such, but has to go down as a 'praise performance', in which God is honoured by the athlete's will to win. 'It's not just fun', Liddell tells his sister, 'To win is to honour him.'

Although Lindsay is not a man of obvious faith, his approach is a wonderful blend of intensity without ultimacy; commitment without the urge to build his identity on the sands of athletic achievement. Just as the Lutheran doctrine of the secular calling does not imply an *identification* of work and worship, it must be possible to interpret sport as a gift – and perhaps even a calling – without dressing it for service in the manner of Abrahams and Liddell, or demonising it in the manner of the young Jennie Liddell. What is, for Abrahams, 'a compulsion, a weapon', and, for Liddell a mission 'to honour' God, is for Lindsay a source of unencumbered delight. He runs with freedom and pleasure, and there is no training that cannot be leavened with challenges involving hurdles and glasses of champagne. Lindsay is the only character in the film who grasps the concept of play. There is, dare I say, a deeply Christian extravagance in his approach. For while he is, of course, an aristocrat who can afford such fripperies, his freedom is no greater than that of a Christian whose cosmic certainty liberates her for that easy and unselfconscious enjoyment of the world that C S Lewis considered the mark of true humility: the ungrasping security that enables her 'to enjoy life so easily.' <sup>44</sup>

The great thing about Lindsay is that he is not out to prove anything to himself or anyone else. He runs for pleasure, and there is generosity as well as gaiety in his outlook. When

Liddell is agonising over the decision not to run on Sunday, and facing a medal-less games, it is Lindsay who offers him the opportunity of winning a gold medal in the 400 metres by sacrificing his place in the event, content with his silver medal in the hurdles. A true 'inversion ritual'! The main narrative moves on to the triumphs of Abrahams and Liddell but here is a glimpse of a Christian approach to sport. It is one that somehow needs to find its way back into the church. 'Works', wrote Martin Luther, 'cannot glorify God, although they may be done *to the glory of God*, if faith be present'. <sup>45</sup> This is a vital and useful distinction, and one that goes far beyond the question of soteriology. If we really think that it is in *victory* that God is honoured, rather than in the spirit of the encounter, we place burdens on sport – indeed we turn it into work. In *The Christian at Play*, Robert Johnston quotes a letter from Dietrich Bonhoeffer in which the theologian expressed his hope that Christianity might recover a spiritual sense of play so manifestly denied in the Protestant stampede for cash-value and ethical gain:

I wonder whether it is possible (it almost seems so today) to regain the idea of the *Church* as providing an understanding of the area of freedom (art, education, friendship, play), so that Kierkegaard's 'aesthetic existence' would not be banished from the Church's sphere, but would be reestablished within it? I really think so... Who is there, for instance, in our times, who can devote himself with an easy mind to music, friendship, games, or happiness? Surely not the 'ethical' man but only the Christian. <sup>46</sup>

Puritanism banishes play from the church. Our second and third stances simply put it to work in the church, with mixed results. A fourth approach is to invite it into the Christian world without compromising its integrity as play. This implies distance as well as affection – something approaching the classical notion of 'eutrapelia' (literally, 'good turning') which Aquinas related explicitly to the subject of play and a concept that is echoed in the book of Ecclesiastes, with its meandering critique of the twin idolatries of hedonism and worldly success. <sup>47</sup> As Hoffman suggests, a Christian approach to sport would preserve what the theologian Lewis Smedes called 'the dialectic of playful seriousness – being seriously involved in something we do not interpret as serious business.' <sup>48</sup> When play is absent, sport simply reinforces the tensions and structures of ordinary life: building an 'iron cage' of competitiveness and alienation to rival that of work. <sup>49</sup> A sense of play can relieve these pressures, while retaining the zest of competition.

The paradox is that most of the benefits of sport – health, friendship and those moments of transcendent beauty that come so rarely in the life of an amateur – flow more abundantly when we loosen the reins and sit more easily with it. It is as if we need to demystify sport in order to release it for transcendence. Freud famously quipped that 'a cigar is sometimes just a cigar' and it is the glory of sport that it is sometimes – *always* – just a game. <sup>50</sup> Rather than brooding with Harold Abrahams on 'Ten lonely seconds to justify my existence', we might follow that other great Olympian, Roger Bannister, in recovering sport in its native simplicity. There is a time for World Cups and Test Matches, and there is a time for touch rugby and the fumbling chaos of village cricket. There is a time for the track and the stopwatch, Bannister was the first to admit, and there is a time for standing barefoot on a beach and just starting to run. Bannister recalled such a moment in his childhood, glorying in the sentiments that his elite career had done so much to attenuate. Next to Lindsay's gracious chivalry, it offers a hint of what a Christian attitude to sport might be:

In this supreme moment I leapt in sheer joy. I was startled, and frightened, by the tremendous excitement that so few steps could create. I glanced around uneasily to see if anyone was watching. A few more steps – self-consciously now and firmly gripping the original excitement. The earth seemed almost to move with me. I was running now, and a fresh rhythm entered my body. No longer conscious of my movement I discovered a new unity with nature. I had found a new source of power and beauty, a source I never dreamt existed.<sup>51</sup>

Perhaps this is the real point of sport: not that we feel God's pleasure, but that he feels ours.

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## Endnotes

- 1 I would like to acknowledge my time teaching 'Grace and Play: Christianity and the Meaning of Sport' at Regent College, Vancouver in July 2011 in the formation of the ideas contained in this paper. In particular, I would like to thank Ben Frederiksen for first identifying the stirring example of Lord Lindsay
- 2 *Wesleyan Methodist Magazine*, July 1873: 632
- 3 See Davis 1971: 41-75; Quotations cited in Anon 2000. For a discussion of the 'social function' of 'foolery' in medieval English society and its eventual collision with an emerging Protestant ethic, see Hill 1978: 16-17, chapter 16
- 4 Erdozain 2010. I write there, as here, as a historian, although the concluding section will introduce some theological perspectives.
- 5 Chesterton 2008: 81
- 6 See Alexander 2005: 215
- 7 Augustine 1961: 122

- 8 Tertullian 2004: 19
- 9 Quoted in Hoffman 2010: 38
- 10 Hart 2009: 123
- 11 McIntosh 1980: 7
- 12 Placher 1996: 102-103
- 13 Weber 2001: 168-169
- 14 See Erdozain 2010: chapter 1
- 15 Earnshaw 1860
- 16 Gosse 1989: 138
- 17 Chalmers 1818
- 18 This phrase, and an uncompromising account of evangelical Puritanism can be found in Ryle 1856: 260
- 19 Quoted Haley 1978: 119
- 20 Mrozek 1983: xvii
- 21 For a fuller discussion of these ideas see Erdozain 2010: chapters 5 and 6; and Erdozain 2011: 59-88
- 22 *The YMCA Bee-Hive*, April 1883: 28
- 23 Weber 2001: 158-159
- 24 Newsome 1961: 159
- 25 Richter 1983: 376
- 26 Most famously, Waugh 1917
- 27 Mangan 1981
- 28 Hoffman 2010: 128
- 29 The Super Bowl is the championship game of the National Football League (NFL), the culmination of the American Football season in the United States
- 30 Hoffman quoted in Higgs 1995: 13
- 31 It might be hard to substantiate the distinction, but it would seem that British writers and evangelists have been more cautious in building on sport's ethic of success, indeed are sometimes more inclined to discuss sport in a context of humour and self-deprecation. Tice 2002
- 32 Scott 1970: 159
- 33 See note 8 above
- 34 1 Corinthians 9:25
- 35 Hoffman 2010: 14
- 36 Hoffman 2010: 15, 134, 133
- 37 Hoffman 2010: 232-233
- 38 Driscoll 2008
- 39 Driscoll 2008: 42
- 40 Driscoll 2008: 41-42
- 41 According to Driscoll, Jesus told a group of Pharisees 'that their moms had \*\*\*\*\* the Devil'. Driscoll 2008: 40-41

42 [theresurgence.com/series/leadership-lessons-from-baseball](http://theresurgence.com/series/leadership-lessons-from-baseball)

43 When Pierre de Coubertin, the founder of the modern Olympics, unveiled a monument at the ruins of Olympia in 1927, he acknowledged his debt 'to Kingsley and Arnold...the founders of athletic chivalry' Coubertin 2000: 515

44 Lewis 1944

45 Luther 1520: paragraph 33, [www.bartleby.com/36/6/2.html](http://www.bartleby.com/36/6/2.html)

46 Johnston 1997: chapter 3

47 See Johnston 1997: chapter 4

48 Hoffman 2010: 276

49 For a perceptive discussion of modern sport as a replication of economic structures, see Deegan 1989: 162. 'American Football,' she writes, 'so idealizes the core codes of present American life that it is hard to imagine its return to the community and to playfulness. The elaboration of football as a big money-maker and a corporate symbol of male power under bureaucratic management has enmeshed it in a male world of elite control.' For the classic account of the modern economic 'cosmos' as 'iron cage' see Weber 2001: 181-182

50 I am grateful to Shirl Hoffman for this analogy, though I take a different view on this particular point

in praise of Folly. In a letter from Antwerp, May.Â was brave enough. Fools had the right of free. speech, and made sport by telling men home. truths. In Germany the greatest licence was.Â the play, is upsetting everything. Erasmus defended himself in a long apology, but the theologians were never satisfied. Twenty years later a Spaniard, Caruaialus, compared him to the lawyer who, feigning madness, had stirred up the Sicilians to a massacre of the French.