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How Should Christians View Fantasy Sports?

Abstract

"Christians often fail to consider that sports, fandom, and fantasy sports can tell us a lot about our society and culture."

Posting about a Christian perspective on fantasy sports from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/how-should-christians-view-fantasy-sports/>

Keywords

In All Things, fantasy football (game), social interaction, idols and images

Disciplines

Christianity

Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt College](#).

How Should Christians View Fantasy Sports?

 [inallthings.org/how-should-christians-view-fantasy-sports/](http://allthings.org/how-should-christians-view-fantasy-sports/)

Paul Fessler

Last Tuesday night, I got together with friends and co-workers for an annual rite of passage: the fantasy football league draft. For the uninitiated, “fantasy sports” allow a group of fans (usually 8-16 people per league) to act like the general manager of a sports team. Participants “draft” actual athletes from a sport to be on their “team” and the players’ real-life statistics and accomplishments translate into points for your fantasy team. You try to score the highest number of points against a different league members’ team each week. You can trade players within the league and pick up new players as the season goes on, but the fantasy team’s performance is linked to how those players perform in real life. Millions of people participate in similar leagues from fantasy golf to fantasy cricket. There’s even a television show centered around a fictional fantasy football league called, unremarkably, “The League”.

How should Christians view fantasy sports? This is a worthwhile question to ask in an era when sports and participation in so-called “fantasy” sports are more popular than ever. Christians often fail to consider that sports, fandom, and fantasy sports can tell us a lot about our society and culture. Christians are consumers of fantasy sports, and like with other aspects of popular culture, we often think very little about such seemingly inoffensive pastimes and mistakenly view them as neutral arenas of interaction.

Though I grew up in a German Lutheran tradition, I’ve found that a Reformed/Kuyperian framework allows Christians to engage and analyze our society in a far more holistic way than merely viewing it as a mission field. Armed with this perspective, we can see that the *structure* and desire behind athletic competition (as an athlete, as a fan, and, yes, even as a fantasy football participant) is a good one. That said, the *direction* of athletics, fandom, or fantasy sports can be *directed* in God-honoring ways or in ways that do not honor God.

One potential problem with the direction of fantasy sports (along with other online or virtual gaming) is how it has redefined “play” in our society. “Play” has long meant true face-to-face interaction with others in athletics or any other type of game. Even a video game might allow you to act as manager or a player that grants you an opportunity to impact the game. While we say that we “play” fantasy sports, it is more like playing the stock market than any game. In fantasy sports, you are more of a general manager with no impact on the game. I can do nothing to impact the Seattle Seahawks defense to prevent more touchdowns.

Many people play fantasy sports online against strangers who have little to no interaction with each other beyond impersonal social media. In such settings, are we truly “playing” anything? Despite the moniker of “social” being attached to things like Facebook and other “social” media, there seems to be an emptiness at the heart of such detached relationships. “Social” networking seems to be an oxymoron as this type of interaction often merely gives one the misleading perception of being connected with others. We interact with “avatars”, fake names, and people that we will never meet. While it can seem fun, it also can be a pretty empty experience, too. It’s like having a Cheetos diet. It seems like food (something good), but just try eating only Cheetos for a day (I did that in junior high... the day didn’t end well). When we participate in fantasy sports in such a manner, it doesn’t reflect the intended nature of play as a means for fellowship and glorification of God.

Like any other activity, how we play fantasy sports can also be misdirected by becoming an idol. It is often subtle so that we sometimes can’t see it. We can become so obsessed with researching waiver wire picks

or preparing for the draft that it dominates everything we do. It becomes a god. In such a setting, play is out of balance from how God intended play to be. When anything becomes an obsession and an idol by taking over our lives, it becomes misdirected.

Unfortunately, we can be blind to idolatry of something seemingly innocuous at the expense of our relationships, our studies, and our other responsibilities. It is a perversion of the balance that we should have in our lives. Of course, this is true for all things — including working or watching television — but we often don't hold up a lot of popular culture in this manner. Such awareness of this goes a long way towards how Christians can and should function within this new social media world. In our league, we've had friends wisely take sabbaticals from the league when they've felt fantasy sports had become too prominent in their lives.

Of course, fantasy sports can also be directed in God-honoring ways, especially if we are aware of its potential problems. Like any other pastime or activity, fantasy sports can provide an opening for fellowship with others — especially when it is with people we know face-to-face. For me, this is perhaps fantasy sports' most redeeming aspect. For the most part, our draft has taken place with face-to-face interaction when drafting. One year, however, we did an online draft. While we were in the same room, it was quiet and almost as if we weren't there to talk to each other at all. There was very little true interaction compared to previous drafts. Yes, it was far, far easier and efficient to draft in this manner, but it was almost like being in a room of strangers. We resolved to avoid such a draft in the future. This year, a league member opened his house to all of us for a loud and fun evening.

I love being part of our fantasy league, especially the draft, even though I'm not particularly crazy about football and far more of a baseball fan (Let's Go Mets!). The good-natured "trash talking" is part of the attraction. For example, everyone thought my first pick in the fantasy draft this year was incredibly stupid (Seattle Seahawks defense) and they all let me know about it in a brutal (but good-natured) fashion. Group emails go around the league throughout the season that wind up being more fun than the final score each week. It provides an opening for talking to others in the hallway or on the sidewalk. The commissioner usually sends out a weekly summary through email at the end of each week to make fun of almost everyone. In the end, it is not primarily about who wins or loses our fantasy league, but about a means to fellowship with each other.

Of course, it is still great to bring home the league trophy at the end of the season. For the record, I convincingly won the league trophy three years ago. I have a feeling the Seattle defense may still be the key to a return to the winner's circle...