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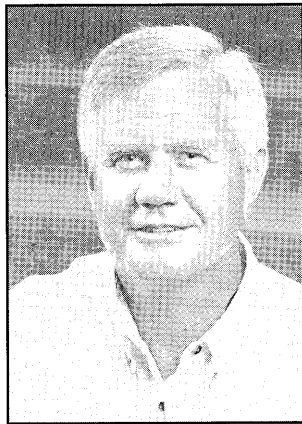
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Just Do It Right: The Experience of Shalom in Sport Participation



by Tom Visker

Sport, according to D. S. Eitzen, is a paradox (Eitzen, 1999). Participation in sport can both enhance and diminish the development of moral character. Christians have traditionally embraced sport participation because it was thought to be a useful tool in the development of characteristics such as respect, honesty, fairness, loyalty, perseverance and discipline. Yet it also is difficult to ignore the selfishness, cheating, disrespect, and violence displayed by professional and amateur athletes alike. Christians who participate in sport regularly encounter this paradox. The purpose of this paper is to assist the Christian community in

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wrestling with this paradox by suggesting a faith-based alternative view of sport participation.

A few comments are in order before we get to the heart of Christian sport participation. First, the term “sport participation” is to be understood in the broadest possible way. It includes not only athletes but also coaches, trainers, game officials, spectators, and everyone else who takes an interest in sport. The paradoxical influence of sport extends to all such “participants.”

Secondly, the phenomenon of sport participation has, for the most part, escaped the serious scrutiny of the Christian community. Most often, we have believed that sport would deliver on its promise of good moral development and have given it *carte blanche* to do so. In our inattentiveness to what was happening to sport, we failed to recognize the moral and ethical deterioration that was occurring and tacitly endorsed many of its practices. The most damaging of these practices is the surreptitious invasion of the “win at all cost” mentality into sport participation.

Finally, we must be aware that our post-modern society will not be very receptive to the model of sport participation suggested here. The predominant themes in sport participation in our society are individualism and relativism. All people claim the right to choose their own form of sport enjoyment without the use of a specific moral standard for their choice of activity or for their behavior as they participate in that activity. In our society, everyone is doing what is right in his or

her own eyes. The sports participation model suggested here recognizes an absolute standard for our choices and behavior in sport and therefore will likely be viewed by many as irrational and intolerant.

Christian models of sport participation

Although Christians have not seriously examined sport, they have attempted to make some connection between playing sports and their Christian faith. The earliest effort to do so is what I term the “pre-game prayer” model, which is characterized by individuals or teams setting aside some time before a contest to pray. Typically, the prayer would include thanks to God for the talents and the skill to play that sport and a request for safety as the athletes played the contest. The bolder participants would even ask for a victory. While prayer is appropriate before a game (and during and after the game, too), for some Christians the pre-game prayer has been merely an attempt to justify their participation in that sport. Their choice of sport and their behavior in that sport has shown little evidence of their Christian faith. This model is what Zylstra (1999) refers to as a “call waiting” approach to sport participation. Sports participants pray before the game, then put their faith on hold during the contest and return to it as soon as the contest is over.

A more recent model of Christian sport participation is the “integration of Christianity and sport.” This model goes beyond merely justifying sport participation by attempting to fuse the participant’s faith-life and sports-life. Doing so does not allow Christians to put their faith on a shelf while they go out to play. Instead, it requires an overlap between who they are as Christians and who they are as sport participants. The two parts of their being must be connected in some way. The difficulty with this model is that it still views faith and sport participation as two separate entities that must, in some way, be fit together. Sometimes that fit can be quite awkward. For example, a former professional football player told his fellow Christians who played on other teams that he was going to “hit [them] with all the love that [he had].” Elaborating on this difficulty, Zylstra (1999) writes, “Any talk about integrating faith and sport/leisure ultimately has to admit that

these really are two disparate things that somehow must be pasted together. Unfortunately, even the strongest laminates never permanently bind.” (p. 170). In the heat of intense competition, even the strongest attempts at keeping the connection between our faith-life and sport-life can fail.

An alternative to these sport participation models is the faith-based or faith-directed model suggested by C. Zylstra (Zylstra, 1999). Faith-directed sport participation flows out of the desire to be faithful to God in all areas of our life. The same biblically-formed principles that provide direction in all other dimensions of life also give direction to sport participation. The sport activities we choose to participate in and how we conduct ourselves during a sport activity are both determined by our biblically-informed Christian faith. Our Christian faith and sport participation are one: we cannot separate them, nor do we have to try forcing them to fit together.

Shalom as the norm for life

But what does a “biblically-informed” approach to sport look like? The Bible does not speak directly to the subject of sport participation—there are no “proof texts” we can turn to for direction in this area. The Bible does, however, provide norms or principles that are instructive for every aspect of life. These norms are embodied in the biblical concept of shalom. Shalom captures the essence of living a faithful, obedient Christian life. All aspects of the Christian life, including participation in sport, must be characterized by shalom.

The conventional understanding of shalom is “peace” or “absence of hostility.” Wolterstorff (1983) defines shalom as “dwelling at peace in all his or her relationships: with God, with self, with fellows, with nature” (p. 69). Plantinga suggests that shalom, richly understood, is more than peace: it should include a “universal flourishing, wholeness and delight” (p.1) in those relationships. Drawing from each of these authors, we can define shalom as a universal flourishing, wholeness, and delight in our relationship to God, self, others, and nature. Hielema (2000) further adds to our understanding of shalom by proposing that the presence or absence of shalom in one of these relationships will manifest itself in the other relationships also. The relationships are intertwined. When our rela-

tionship with God lacks shalom, that lack will become evident in how we relate to others, think about our self, and interact with nature.

Why make shalom the underlying principle of sport participation? Very simply, because shalom is the calling of all those who profess Jesus Christ as their Savior. Scripture is a record of God's relationship to His creation. At the core of that relationship is His son, Jesus Christ. It is only through the person and work of Jesus Christ that creation can be placed at peace with its Creator. Christ's death and resurrection reconciled the creation to the Creator. Listen to Isaiah as he describes this reconciliation through the promised Messiah:

The wolf will live with the lamb,
the leopard will lie down with the goat,
the calf and the lion and
the yearling together;
and a little child will lead them.
The cow will feed with the bear,
their young will lie down together,
and the lion will eat straw like the ox.
The infant will play near
the hole of the cobra,
and the young child put his hand
into the viper's nest.
They will neither harm nor destroy
on my holy mountain,
for the earth will be full
of the knowledge of the Lord
as the water covers the sea.

(Isaiah 11:6-9)

The apostle Paul also writes of this reconciliation in Colossians 1:19: "For God was pleased to have his fullness dwell in [Christ], and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross." The purpose of Christ, according to Paul, was to bring shalom between the Creator and His creation. Our desire to become Christ-like requires us, in turn, to accept the call to become agents of shalom in a fallen and broken world.

Sports participation that is rooted in biblically-directed faith, then, is involvement in sport in a way that fosters shalom in our relationship to God, self, others, and nature. We will now focus on the nature of shalom in each of these relationships.

An early indicator of what the Bible teaches regarding these relationships can be found in the two tables of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20,

Deuteronomy 5). The first four commandments address our relationship to God. The remaining six commandments, in the second table, instruct us on our relationship with others. Jesus summarizes both tables in his commandment to love: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength and...love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:30-31). The principle attribute of shalom in our relationship to God, self, and others is love.

Additional characteristics of shalom in these relationships can be found in Galatians 5 and

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Colossians 3. These chapters are particularly instructive in their vivid contrast of the characteristics of the worldly (sinful) nature with the new, Spirit-filled nature. These passages show us what should and should not be characteristic of relationships. Galatians 5 indicates that a Spirit-led life will bear the fruits of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (vs. 21-22). Conversely, the worldly nature will be characterized by sexual immorality, impurity, debauchery, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, and orgies (vs. 19-21). In the same way, the rules for holy living described in Colossians 3 tell us that our lives must show compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forgiveness, love, and peace. By contrast, the worldly nature is identified with sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, anger, rage, malice, slander, filthy language, and lying. These passages from the Old and New Testaments provide us with a clear picture of what is to characterize our relationships with God, self, and others if those relationships are to be flourishing, whole, and delightful.

Shalom in our relationship to nature has seldom been considered in the context of sport. However, in much of sport we are fully engaged with nature

and, therefore, must be aware of what shalom is in this relationship. At the center of a “shalomful” relationship with nature is the notion of stewardship. In Genesis 1:28-30, God entrusted the crown of His creation (man) with dominion over the remainder of creation. This dominion was not to be an abusive, self-serving dominion. It was intended to be the loving, caring, serving dominion that Christ models as head of the church. Stewardship is a loving, caring, and serving responsibility for what God entrusted to us. Only then can we genuinely be at shalom with nature.

Shalom in sport participation

With this understanding of how shalom is manifested in each of these relationships, we can turn our attention to the experience of shalom in sport participation. The faith-directed sport participant will strive to make the pursuit of shalom the guiding principle of his or her choices and behavior in sport. It is impossible to show definitively how this would be accomplished in every instance. We can, however, offer a few general examples to demonstrate how Christians can experience and pursue shalom in sport participation.

Experiencing shalom in our relationship to God as we play sports begins with the recognition of God as the source of our play. In our play, we celebrate our joyous life that is secure in Christ (Hoffman, 1986). Only through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ are we freed from earning our salvation. Our salvation is a gift from our loving Father. We do not need to spend every moment of our existence trying to gain our salvation. Therefore, we can play and play joyfully! When this gratitude is the starting point of our sport participation, we can take delight in our relationship with God while we play sport.

A second way that sport participation can honor our relationship to God is in the development of the various physical skills necessary to play sports. God created the human body with the marvelous capacity to move in many different ways. Playing sports allows the athlete to explore the range of human movement in an effort to accomplish the goal of a particular game or contest. These movements are refined during practice sessions and displayed in games so that others can appreciate the movement capacity of the human body.

However, experiencing shalom with God in sport becomes difficult when participants take sport too seriously. Some take sport so seriously they see sport as a religion (Nixon and Frey, 1996). When sport is elevated to this level, it can soon replace God as the object of our worship. It becomes an idol to which we offer our time, money, and effort, while our relationship with God suffers. Though this can happen to any sport participant, coaches are especially susceptible to this temptation due to the time and energy demands of coaching a sport.

Shalom in our relationship with our own selves while playing sport can be experienced in many ways. An appropriate love of self can result in a respect for our body that can foster a commitment to an active, healthy lifestyle. We experience joy in wholeheartedly participating in an activity that we love. We can be at peace with our self when we have patience as we learn new skills and try to correct our mistakes. We can demonstrate self-control by avoiding anger and rage as we play. Most importantly, we can be at peace with our self and God when we participate in sport according to biblical norms for faithful, obedient living.

Unfortunately, this shalom with self is often violated in sport when participation and accomplishments become a source of pride. Excessive pride in sport accomplishments fails to acknowledge God as the source of the talents and abilities that have allowed us to achieve in sport. Closely related to this excess pride is the danger of selfish ambition in playing sports. Playing sport for self-glorifying rewards such as being selected to the all-conference or all-state team, being chosen the most valuable player, or simply for the notoriety of being an athlete or coach can be detrimental to the development of a wholesome concept of self.

Shalom in our relationship with others in sport participation can also be demonstrated in a number of ways. Love can be shown through a genuine concern and respect for those with whom we participate. By avoiding the “war mentality” so prevalent in sport, we can come to appreciate the talents and skills of our competitors and to realize that it is only through the giving of their best effort that we are able to refine our skills and strategies. We can exhibit kindness by showing compassion. We can demonstrate meekness and humility by

being humble in victory and gracious in defeat. In these ways, and many more, sport participation can contribute to a relationship with others that is wholesome, flourishing, and delightful.

However, it is probably in our relationship with others that the concept of shalom in sport is most frequently violated. The “trash-talking” between players, the disrespect given to officials by players, coaches, and fans, and the physical violence intentionally inflicted on opponents are commonplace in sport today. What is most disconcerting about these behaviors is that they have become the norm for sport participation. Hate, not love, is becoming the prevailing attitude toward opponents. As one college coach said about his school’s arch rival, “We hate each other, that’s all there is to it; both teams hate each other and it’s great—it’s a good environment” (Maroney, 2000, p.1B). Clearly, it is impossible for sport participation to be a tool for building shalom with others if hate is the dominant characteristic of sport behavior.

Lastly, one of the factors that affects the experience of shalom with nature in sport participation is the type of sport activities that we choose. Choices based in the concept of stewardship will enhance the experience of shalom as we play. Conversely, choices based in an abusive, self-serving dominion over nature will destroy shalom with nature. Holmes (1981) provides food for thought about being in shalom with nature:

We can play responsibly in God’s world or we can play destructively and profligately, spending our natural resources on riotous living. I question the use of scarce resources in auto racing. I question the stewardship in roaring around a placid lake in a gas guzzling motorboat that exhales noxious fumes. I question not only bullfighting and cockfighting, but also hunting animal for “sport alone,” not for food or other responsible purposes. I question play that needlessly defaces nature’s beauty or upsets its eco-balance. Such “games” disregard the stewardly purpose and consequent limitations of man’s “dominion” over nature. (p. 47)

Indeed, we must responsibly carry out our role as stewards of God’s creation in choosing our sports, for creation is the context for our experience of shalom with nature and with God.

In our world, sport can indeed, as Eitzen says, be a paradox. Without biblical direction for sport participation, sport can be a destructive tool that gradually erodes the universal flourishing, wholeness, and delight intended for our relationship with God, self, others, and nature. However, faith-directed sport participation that flows out of the desire to be faithful and obedient to the biblical norms that direct all aspects of life will allow us to experience shalom in the richest sense of the word.

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