

Faculty Work Comprehensive List

---

3-11-2021

## The Expected Value of Sports in the Christian School

Timothy Van Soelen

*Dordt University*, [timothy.vansoelen@dordt.edu](mailto:timothy.vansoelen@dordt.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/faculty\\_work](https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/faculty_work)



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Van Soelen, T. (2021). The Expected Value of Sports in the Christian School. Retrieved from [https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/faculty\\_work/1273](https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/faculty_work/1273)

This Blog Post is brought to you for free and open access by Dordt Digital Collections. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Work Comprehensive List by an authorized administrator of Dordt Digital Collections. For more information, please contact [ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu](mailto:ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu).

---

## The Expected Value of Sports in the Christian School

### Keywords

athletics, Christian Education, coaching, mission

### Disciplines

Christianity

### Comments

Re-posted from The Center for the Advancement of Christian Education (CACE) blog.

Online access: [The Expected Value of Sports in the Christian School](#)

# The Expected Value of Sports in the Christian School

Just like everything else in pandemic world, sports has undergone major changes in the last year. Cross-country runners competing with masks seems antithetical to a sport where inhaling oxygen efficiently is paramount to success. Some high school tennis programs required different colored balls for the home team and the away team to mitigate transmission risk. Phrases like “a season like no other” and “we are just thankful we’re able to play” are commonly heard as student-athletes return to the court, field, and track. The resurgence of high school sports post-Covid has undoubtedly been a riveting saga to watch unfold.

## Reset the Stopwatch

As we transition to fewer restrictions, now is a good time to analyze the role of sports in our schools. Like our broader culture, we have fallen in love with a *Friday Night Lights* mentality. Our teams dress up on game days. (Is this practice missional or exclusive?). Of our student-athletes we demand untold hours for athletic practices and games. (Have we compared this data to time spent on academic work?). Our schools commit a significant percentage of human and financial resources to athletics. (Do we collect and evaluate this data? Are we concerned that many coaches are paid below the minimum wage?). The overarching question we need to ask and answer is this: *Are sports central to the mission of our school?*

For many of the schools CACE works with, the answer is “yes.” I agree that that answer, but how do we know what we know? We can identify data points such as higher enrollment numbers, less truancy, higher participation rates in accelerated classes, and higher grade point averages for student-athletes than students who do not participate in athletics. We cite research that demonstrates improved mental and physical health. Positive gains in self-concept, self-image, physical activity, and weight management are benefits realized through activity participation. Participation in high school activities is also a predictor of later success in college and career, with increased chances of becoming a healthy, contributing member of society.

However, nothing from these data points aligns specifically to most Christian schools’ mission statements. For our athletic programs, there is little evidence about who we are, what we do, why we do it, and for whom do we do it—questions that a school’s mission statement should answer. So, back to the essential question, *are sports central to the mission of our schools?*

In a column published in 1927, Roy Henderson, the athletic director of the University Interscholastic League (a public-school sports organization in Texas), articulated the challenge of keeping sports and academics in balance: “Football cannot be defended in

the high school unless it is subordinated, controlled, and made to contribute something definite in the cause of education.” This statement comes from the state home of *Friday Night Lights*, written almost 100 years ago. “Subordinated,” “controlled,” and “made to contribute” . . . powerful words used to put football in the context of education in Texas. As Christian schools include athletics in the context of our mission, is our athletic program subordinate to our mission? Does our mission direct our athletic program? Does our athletic program contribute to the mission of our institution? How do we know?

## **Athletics’ Relationship to Mission**

Athletic programs feature prominently within the culture of a school, among the most powerful of society’s institutions. In *Football and the Common Good*, author Andy Crouch explains that institutions are defined by “deeply and persistently organized patterns of human behaviors . . . rich and complex systems of behaviors, beliefs, patterns, and possibilities that can be handed on from one generation to the next. And it is within institutions, in the broad sense of the word, that our most significant human experiences take place. Institutions are at the heart of culture-making, which means they are at the heart of human flourishing and the comprehensive flourishing of creation that we call *shalom*.”

Crouch’s description certainly sounds like an athletic program: “organized patterns of human behavior,” “rich and complex systems,” “handed down from one generation to the next,” “culture-making,” “flourishing.” Middle school and high school athletic programs can contribute to the mission of our institution. For the Christian school, they *must*, or else they become distractions and distortions of who (and Whose) we are.

High school sports have always excited me—as a participant, parent, and school supporter. I have an expected value that high school sports will contribute to the mission of the Christian school. The public arena of high school sports can be an incredible opportunity for Christian schools to bear witness to the name of Christ, often our most public voice in our communities. From newspaper and tv coverage to social media posts, high school sports in the Christian school can be a blessing, but the exposure can also be a curse. Sometimes it takes only one tremendous or poor interview from a coach or player in the state tournament to change the narrative.

## **Coaching for Transformation**

Helping schools tell the story of why high school sports are mission-centric is why CACE developed the Coaching for Transformation framework. Coaching for Transformation (CfT) challenges the principles and practices within Christian school athletics to foster alignment from administrator to athlete so that the deep hope of each school is realized through a transformative experience for athletes, coaches, and the wider community.

For the past year, a group of fifteen coaches and athletic directors have piloted this framework. The result of their excellent work has been the development of the Gameplan, a framework for athletic directors and coaches to ensure mission alignment. Also included is Playbook, a growing set of sport-specific resources for practice and assessment. Finally, in concert with one of CACE's core values of networking Christian schools, Coaching for Transformation invites you into a network of like-minded athletic directors and coaches who desire to align their programs and lead Christianly.