

*Christian Faith and Sports **

II Timothy 4: 5-8

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Hi, my name is Rush and I am a sports fanatic. I came to be this way naturally and honestly. As I was growing up in Georgia, sports were part of the rhythm of the seasons and daily life. Sports can bring some order and some community to lives which often are disordered and lonely. In the autumn, there was Gainesville High School Red Elephant football on Friday night, college games (mostly on the radio) on Saturday, and the Washington Redskins on Sunday. There were usually only two or three games on Saturdays and Sundays to be viewed on television. Sometimes even Sunday school became a discussion, often heated, about the games the previous day. We would be happy for days if our team had won and our friends' favorite had lost.

We would weep when the evil Paul Bryant, with all his dirty Alabama players, would emerge victorious over Georgia or Georgia Tech. It was said by people from Alabama that Coach Bryant was so mean that a ferocious animal was named for him. In Alabama football is the state religion. Bear Bryant used to say, "If you want to walk in Heaven where the streets are gold, you'll have to know the password, 'Roll, Tide, Roll!'" One of the most famous jokes about Bear Bryant is that an Auburn fan had just arrived in Heaven and looked out at a tower where an old man wearing a hounds tooth hat was seated and supervising a football practice. "Oh, no," cried the Auburn fan. "Don't tell me Bear Bryant is up here!" St. Peter replied, "No, that's God—He just thinks he is Bear Bryant!"¹

We didn't only listen to, watch, and talk sports; we played them. I was at least a five sport participant—football, basketball, baseball, of course, and then tennis and golf whenever possible and affordable. Make it six if you count bicycle riding for several miles every day, seven if you count swimming as often as the weather allowed, eight if you count the occasional pugilistic encounter at school or on the playgrounds, nine if bowling qualifies! At that time we had not entered into the mystical discussions of whether billiards or poker are sports—apparently they are, because now they are on the cable sports channels and not elsewhere. This was also before soccer, lacrosse, hockey, NASCAR, volleyball, or any of the x-treme sports made it to the Southland in any organized way. There was budding NASCAR activity when some people who shall remain anonymous at least one time did drag races across the Thompson Bridge over Lake Lanier, which was almost exactly a quarter mile. Very stupid! Of course the originators of NASCAR were known to many as they transported their white lightning from stills hidden away in the mountain hollows.

I attained some local notoriety by leading my eighth grade basketball team to the city championship as point guard, scoring 14 of the team's 36 points in the finals, and that was before the three point shot was invented. If only I had been born later, I would have scored a lot more. My sports dreams suffered a serious blow when I was around

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sixteen—and, because of injury, ineptitude, and barely average stature, simultaneously was put on permanent waivers by the NCAA, NFL, NBA, MLB, WTA, and PGA, and no team or agent picked up my offer to play for free. By the time I turned thirty, my agent quit returning my calls and obtained an unlisted phone number! Nevertheless, I continued to love and play sports—in college and seminary as intramural quarterback and wide receiver and as point guard and as softball pitcher. I also got in the occasional golf game and tennis match and attended a Master's and a British Open long ago. I played on many of the famous golf courses of Scotland. Over the years I remember seeing Hank Aaron and the Braves go against Sandy Koufax and Don Drysdale and the Dodgers back when major league ball first arrived in Atlanta and numerous games since then. Over time I have watched more Southern Conference, ACC, SEC and Panthers games than I can count. My last run at organized basketball was when I lived in Atlanta, and we had a better than .500 record in the church league, but statistically led only in the category of technical fouls. We were in our 40's mostly, and the other teams were usually two decades younger, and the referees sometimes caught us tackling from behind on the opponents' fast breaks.

I could go on, but please understand that I do appreciate sports. They are given to us for joy, play, and, one hopes, for physical health. Sports are probably meant to be played instead of watched. It's more important to be on the field than it is to be in the stands.

For, me, and maybe for you, as time has passed and the marketing has intensified, I wonder, I just wonder, whether sports have become an idol for us. Now, an idol is a good thing which we elevate to a position of power and authority. Usually idols are wonderful things which take over and assume authority in a way which becomes unhealthy and unbecoming, especially for people of faith. Remember, the first commandment of the Ten is "You shall have no other gods before me," and the commandments are given to us not to make us feel guilty, but to make us free. Sports ought not to take the place of God, because sports cannot save us or give us grace or life in any deep sense. We tend to take on the value system of our idols. In the case of contemporary sports, this may be "winning is the only thing," or "show me the money." If one good thing about sports is the teaching of teamwork, discipline, and even sacrifice, why is it that so often we read or hear about an athlete or a coach forsaking a team simply for more personal gain or getting in trouble after hours or taking short cuts with "performance enhancing drugs?" These latter day values may not be very consistent with the best of our religious tradition, where a Cross is at the heart and winning in human terms doesn't matter because we are moving toward a kingdom where the last shall be first.

And, I wonder, I just wonder, if I don't need help with my sports fanaticism. Maybe, just maybe, it has become an addiction. I may be hooked, and so I need your help, please. The problem with addictions is that they make us behave in stupid and out of control ways, and they interfere with our relationships and work and community living and service. Maybe in this age of cool and of repressed emotions, we need to have places where we can scream without fear of retribution, but I find myself often screaming at the television. So far, no officials have reversed their dumb calls and no coach has heeded my excellent advice! Though I have never painted my face or taken off my shirt in the stands in a midwinter game, I understand those who find it meaningful to do so. I find myself sometimes expending more emotional energy with

the sports pages than with the sufferings of the poor or with major issues such as homelessness and affordable housing. There were two cartoons about the Super Bowl which caught my eye. In one, a woman is saying to a man, "We've already watched three quarters of the game. Can't we talk about *us* during the fourth quarter?" In another the woman says to a bleary-eyed guy who is on the couch and surrounded by beer bottles and newspapers, "What will you do with your life after the Super Bowl?"

Now, when our idols and our addictions tag team against us, we are no match for them without others to come to our aid. Our idols and addictions are strong. As the first step of the twelve-step program puts it, "we are powerless before them." The joy, the *play*, diminishes, and our moods are under the sway of whether our team has won or lost. The play becomes more often the past memory, and the present becomes passive viewing of an electronic screen. We have our opiate, our great tune out, our American version of bread and circuses.

Our idols and addictions also sometimes stoke our other and perhaps more lethal addictions (watch the advertisements during athletic events!), and they also carry over to our children. With many of you, I have struggled with the invasion and escalation of youth sports becoming more and more dominant at younger and younger ages. Children are encouraged to specialize in one sport and never learn others. They are subject to overuse of certain muscle groups and more risk of serious injury and possibly to public humiliation by adult onlookers, overzealous coaches, or even by their own parents.

Family schedules and faith commitments are besieged by Sunday games and practices. We are asked now to make difficult, but indeed necessary decisions about our life's priorities and what we really want to teach and to model for our children. If the Church has two or three hours a week of Christian education for children, and that is abdicated for the sake of sports, our children will not have a sustaining and abiding faith as they grow older. And, by the way, the lure of sports becomes stronger and stronger and more expensive as your children age, requiring hundreds and thousands of dollars per season, depending upon the frequency of away games and travel teams. Other than football, the typical high school athlete will have an average of 24 games per season, most of them on school nights. Yes, the Church can be flexible and offer more convenient times for worship and for study, but during the week there are also practices, games, workouts, along with homework and other activities.

Yes, exercise is more and more important in a culture of obesity, but also remember that fewer than 1% of high school athletes will play in college, and a much smaller percentage of college athletes will ever become professional athletes. It's probably better not to anticipate the college scholarship or pro contract for our children. With all the emphasis and excellence of high school athletics in Charlotte, and with thousands of young people participating each year, I can think of only three or four from our area who are playing professionally. Youth sports should be about fitness and fun and not so much about winning. The question after the game should be "Did you enjoy playing today?" instead of "Why did you miss that goal/foul shot/fly ball/pitch?"

You see, our idols and addictions eventually raise hard questions, difficult questions, about our stewardship of time, of talents/energy, and yes, of money. If our personal expenditures on sports and entertainment are more than our Church tithe and other charitable giving, we may need to realign our actions to be more in accordance

with our Scriptures. Our idols and addictions also lead to questions about social priorities and political decisions.

With regard to stewardship of time, if you, like me, are happily able to watch three sporting events per week on television (and that could easily become five or ten depending on whether it's March Madness or bowl season. This past year there were 32 bowl games), if you watch three sporting events per week, over the course of a year, you are watching sports as many hours as you would invest in many weeks on the job or in some community service or mission. Nine hours a week for 52 weeks equals 468 hours or the equivalent of 11 forty-hour weeks. That is time lost and gone forever, spent in every sense of the word.

With regard to stewardship of money, one hesitates even to tread here. Some tickets to today's Super Bowl are being sold for \$12 thousand each. Ads are about \$5 million per minute (one 1/2 minutes ??? is he saying 1.5 minutes or .5 minute???? of advertising costs more than the total raised every year of the national Souper Bowl offering for hunger). The salary of one average professional athlete would erase the deficits of the major arts organizations in Charlotte and would exceed the annual budget of many struggling schools and relief agencies.

It's not that sports are bad or that other things are not equally as strange (movie stars and entertainers' incomes, for example), and it's not that many sports figures don't give generously of their wealth (some do, but most don't). It's just that our proportions and our judgment have become seriously out of kilter. Locally, the University of North Carolina at Charlotte is seriously considering spending \$100 million in order to start a football team, much of which would be funded by increasing student fees by \$150 per year. William Friday, former president at Chapel Hill, recently said that fewer than ten universities in Division I athletics make any money from sports, and all the rest lose considerable amounts. On the professional sports level, the question of public money being spent for the benefit of athletic team owners has been well debated in Charlotte, and we are about to do that again with plans for an uptown baseball stadium.

Our idols and addictions can quickly take hold of our family life, our time, and our checkbooks. And they can also do serious harm to our bodies. Given to us for health, teamwork, and joy, sports more often than not have become a passive spectator event. I need your help. I think the congregation is one place where these issues need to be considered deliberately, seriously, and hopefully, and members of the congregation are called to be leaders in the culture and perhaps to put some clear thinking and faith commitments into the mix whenever possible. There are ways for our children to be involved at a fairly high level of competition without our having to give up our participation in worship and Christian education, and this begins with parents being parents and with parents sticking together.

So I leave us with some questions: 1) If you have driven hundreds of miles to attend athletic contests, but have not driven the five miles to the soup kitchen, Room in the Inn, the Habitat house site, or the nursing home, maybe there is time for you to regain your balance. 2) If you have neglected your family too often for the sake of sports, maybe there is time for repentance. 3) If you have kicked your dog or hated your neighbor because your team lost, maybe there is mercy.

In an address in 1995 on "Ethical Issues in American Sports," Dr. Stanley Eitzen of Colorado State University said this:

Sport has the potential to ennoble its participants and society. Athletes strain, strive, and sacrifice to excel. But if sport is to exalt the human spirit, it must be practiced within a context guided by fairness and humane considerations. Competition is great but it can go too far. Personally, I know that my competitive drive has gone too far when: a) the activity is no longer enjoyable—i.e., there is too much emphasis on the outcome and not on the process; b) I treat my opponents with disrespect; c) I am tempted to gain an unfair advantage; d) I cannot accept being less than the best even when I have done my best. I believe that many times those intimately involved in sport have stepped over these lines.²

I need your help with my sports fanaticism. And so to begin a personal journey toward better health for myself, I am going to start a plan of exercising a half hour for every hour I spend watching sports. This week, if I watch the Super Bowl and also watch the Tar Heels defeat the Blue Devils on Wednesday night, that should be about three hours of exercise. (Better make that a revised resolution—for every hour watching, fifteen minutes of exercise.)

In summary, let us remember the words of John Wooden, who won ten national titles as UCLA basketball coach: “I always tried to make clear that basketball is not the ultimate. It is of small importance in comparison to the total life we live. There is only one kind of life that truly wins, and that is the one that places faith in the hands of the Savior. Until that is done, we are on an aimless course that runs in circles and goes nowhere.”³

Notes

1. For an illuminating essay on Alabama football (and by inference, big time sports everywhere), see Rick Bragg, “The Rising Tide,” at www.SI.com (*Sports Illustrated*), August 21, 2007.
2. Stanley Eitzen, “Ethical Issues in American Sports,” *Vital Speeches of the Day*, 1995.
3. Alan Williams, *Walk-On: Life from the End of the Bench* (Austin: New Heights Press, 2006), 57-58.