The Theology of Winning:

Christianity in Competitive Athletics in American Culture

by
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Mark Granquist, Advisor

This work is dedicated to my coach, teacher, mentor, and friend,
Dr. Stephen L. Wilkinson.

Thank you endlessly for teaching me and for spreading God's love through the way you live your life. Thank you for your mission and for sharing it with me.
May we always work together, wherever we are.

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Contents

Introduction

Christianity and Athletics – "More Than Just a Game?"

I have been an athlete since I have been able to stand on my own two feet. My father taught me to play basketball, baseball, and football as soon as I was old enough to walk. My fondest childhood memories are of playing catch and watching games on television with him while wearing my various sports uniforms. I attended my first Minnesota Twins baseball game at the Hubert H. Humphrey Metrodome in Minneapolis, Minnesota, at the ripe old age of two.

During grade school I played competitive hockey, basketball, football, baseball and tennis. In junior high school I was forced to narrow my areas of participation. I chose hockey over basketball, and tennis over my first love, baseball, largely because I had been selected to the varsity tennis team in eighth grade. In high school I was the starting goaltender for our school's hockey team, a wide receiver and kick returner on the football team, and a top-level state competitor in tennis.

During my four years in college, I have been a member of one of the nation's elite Division III men's tennis teams, and have taught tennis at one of the most widely recognized and respected summer tennis camps in the country. Athletics have always been, and likely always will be, an important part of my life. I am a passionate athlete

and competitor. When I finish competing, I anticipate continuing my involvement in athletics as a coach and, as always, a fan.

I was baptized in the Catholic church when I was a baby. At least nominally, I have been a Christian since then. I have been a part of the Christian story each day of my life. The first time that I can remember being in relation to God was when my parents divorced one another. I was seven years old, and I pleaded with God to keep them together.

Since that time, my faith has been shaped in different ways. In high school I was a member of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) huddle at Duluth East High. This experience made Christianity a part of my life in a way that it had not previously been. Sports were my main concern. FCA brought religion into my life through athletics, a medium that I understood very well. I was no longer was forced to choose between church and sport. The two were combined in a meaningful way. I attended FCA's summer leadership camp, and was slated to be a member of the Duluth East High FCA leadership team during my sophomore year, before I transferred to Duluth's Marshall School.

In college, I have engaged in the critical study of religion for nearly four years. No experience has done more for my understanding of the Christian story and my place in it. This study has challenged the beliefs with which I grew up and has forced me to think carefully, responsibly, and at times radically about what it is, exactly, that I believe about God and about Christianity. I am currently an active member in the Catholic church. I teach religious education as a confirmation instructor to eleventh-grade students. As a person of faith, I am passionate about Christianity because it has been a

transforming force in my life. As a student, I am passionate about the critical study of religion because it continually shapes and reshapes my thoughts about the world in which we live.

Sifting through my personal history as a Christian and as an athlete allows me to connect, in my own life, sports and religion – two major institutions in American culture. In 1992 my little league baseball team, the Eastern All-Stars, won the Minnesota State Little League championship. We then moved on the United States Central Region Championships in Indianapolis, Indiana. This was the last time that I can recall competing without feeling that God was involved in some capacity with what I was doing athletically. I was twelve years old. Since then, as mentioned above, I have competed at many levels in different sports. I have played in countless "big games" and "important matches." I have tasted both success and defeat as an individual and as team member. I used to think that the best way for me, as an athlete, to show Jesus that I loved him was to compete with full effort. I believed that the most profound way God could show God's love to me was to bless me with a spot on the traveling hockey team or a victory in a difficult tennis match.

I believe that we can learn about God and experience God's love and grace in the realm of athletics. Christ can act through this branch of our culture (just as Christ can act through any other branch of our culture) to show us this love and grace. Major and professional competitive athletics in American culture have adopted and are currently adapting Christianity, but not for the purpose of communicating God's love. I have a passion for athletics and I have a passion for Christianity. Their current relationship must change, however, if they are to continue being interwoven. Otherwise we will eventually

find ourselves struggling to find the presence of the Christian message of love anywhere in the religion that the sports world claims is Christianity.

What Game Are We Playing?

This project is about sports and religion, but much that falls under the subject will not be covered here. A popular academic discussion surrounding this topic deals with sport as religion or religious experience. Many authors argue that sports in general, or a specific sport (most often football or baseball), are America's "civil religions." This discussion is fascinating and many-sided, but it is not the focus of this paper.[1] Religions other than Christianity are also left off of the schedule for this particular work. Islam is very prevalent amongst many athletes in American culture. It moved to the foreground of

[1] Sport as religion is probably the most written about topic in the field of sports and religion. There are three main perspectives on the issue. The first position is essentially that sport ought not be considered religious or religion. Robert J. Higgs is one of the prominent representatives of this position. In his article entitled "Muscular Christianity, Holy Play and Spiritual Exercises: Confusion About Christ in Sports and Religion," He writes: "Sports belong to the realm of the beautiful and play to the world of nature, but neither with the holy...Religion, by contrast, partakes of the spiritual sublime." The article appears in Shirl J. Hoffman, ed. *Sport and Religion* (Champaign, Ill.: Human Kinetics Books, 1992), 90. Higgs also develops his position in his full-length work titled *God in the Stadium: Sports and Religion in America* (Lexington, Ky.: University Press of Kentucky, 1995). The second position is that sports are like religion in many ways, but in other ways, they cannot expose humans to the sacred as formal religions, such as Christianity, can. The Roman Catholic philosopher Michael Novak is a prominent representative of this position. He writes: "Sports flow outward into action from a deep natural impulse that is radically religious: an impulse of freedom, respect for ritual limits, a zest for meaning and a longing for perfection." Michael Novak, *The Joy of Sport: Endzones, Bases, Baskets, Balls, and the Consecration of the American Sport* (Lanham, Md.: Madison Books, 1994), 19. The final position is that sport is a religion. Charles Prebish, a religious studies professor at Penn State University, is one of the main representatives of this perspective. In his article "Heavenly Father, Divine Goalie: Sport and Religion," Prebish writes: "What it all boils down to is this: if sport can bring its advocates to an experience of the ultimate, and this [pursuit and] experience is expressed through a formal series of public and private rituals requiring a symbolic language and space deemed sacred by its worshipers, then it is both proper and necessary to call sport itself a religion." The article appears in Shirl J. Hoffman, ed. *Sport and Religion* (Champaign, Ill.: Human Kinetics Books, 1992), 53. Hoffman's book includes an entire section on sport as religion. Charles Prebish also edits his own collection of essays that deal with sports as religion. The work is titled: *Sport and Religion: The Meeting of the Sacred and Profane* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1993). The different perspectives on this issue are also articulated throughout Joseph L. Price's work *From Season to Season: Sports as American Religion* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 2001). A new work edited by Christopher H. Evans and William R. Herzog II that deals with baseball as an American civil religion is titled *The Faith of Fifty Million: Baseball, Religion, and American Culture* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002).

the American sports world in February of 1964. Cassius Clay defeated Sonny Liston to become the Heavyweight Champion of the World. The following day he announced that he had joined the Nation of Islam and had changed his name to Muhammad Ali.[2] Athletics has been very much connected to the American Jewish experience in the 20th century. Two of the greatest players in baseball's history, Sandy Koufax and Hank Greenberg, were Jews who faced great challenges in their careers because of their faith. The American public and media ridiculed Koufax in 1965 when he refused to pitch in the opening game of the World Series because it was played on Yom Kippur.[3] Eastern religions such as Zen Buddhism are often applied to many different sports. This Eastern philosophical and spiritual approach to the mental aspect of competition has become especially popular among many athletes in sports such as golf and tennis.[4] Finally, this project will not include an examination of sports outside of American culture. In Europe, and in Central and South America, soccer, like baseball or football in the United States, could be considered a civil religion. This discussion and its related issues lie outside the scope of this work.

What is the focus of this project, then? It explores the ways in which Christianity has been adopted and adapted by the American sports industry (including major collegiate and professional teams, athletes, fans, and ministry outreach organizations) into a strategy for winning. This "theology of winning" is the driving force behind the

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[2] For a clear and detailed description of the events surrounding Ali's conversion see: David Remnick, *King of the World: Muhammad Ali and the Rise of an American Hero* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998). For stories of other Muslim athletes in American culture see: Steve Hubbard, *Faith in Sports: Athletes and Their Religion on and off the Field* (New York: Doubleday, 1998). Athletes profiled include Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Hakeem Olajuwan, and others.

[3] For an extensive look at how sports, especially professional baseball and boxing, have helped to shape the identity of American Jews, see: Peter Levine, *From Ellis Island to Ebbets Field: Sport and the American Jewish Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

[4] For one of the earliest and most popular applications of Eastern religion to athletic competition, see: Timothy W. Gallwey, *The Inner Game of Tennis* (New York: Random House, 1974).

current sports world in American culture. The big business of competitive athletics is based on winning. Nothing is more important to players, coaches, owners, fans, and the media, than being the best and achieving success in terms of wins and losses. Brian Aitken writes:

> Of course, winning is an essential component of sport. No matter what the level of sport there is always present a desire to achieve a good or better outcome. Yet in contemporary sport...winning does not involve just the desire to demonstrate a superiority of skills which is a normal goal of any game; rather, it involves an inordinate desire to win in an absolute sense, a desire to dominate, to obliterate, to wipe out the opponent...'Winning isn't everything – it's the only thing' – has become a statement of faith.[5]

This is a theology because it is one step removed from the "doctrine" of sports – those elements that are necessary for the existence of sport, such as players and fields of play. It is above the rules or the objects of the games. It is the language and the context in which the games are played. This desire to achieve triumph is also theological because God is a part of it. It is a means by which American culture views God. Religion, more specifically Christianity, is interwoven with sports so that God is expected to have a hand in separating winners and losers. God is certainly at work in the world through cultural institutions such as competitive athletics, but winning and success dominate this particular institution, as they do many others in our culture. This element of competitive athletics reveals different concepts of God and Jesus Christ. This provides the grounds for a theological discussion. The theology of winning includes the view of winning as everything, combined with an adapted Christianity that promotes triumphalism and domination.

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[5] Brian W.W. Aitken, "Sport, Religion and Human Well-Being," in *Sport and Religion,* ed. Shirl J. Hoffman (Champaign, Ill.: Human Kinetics Books, 1992), 239-240.

As a competitive athlete and a theologian-in-training, my goal in the pages that follow is not to put down athletes or organizations that combine these two parts of American culture in ways that I would not choose to. Their spirituality and religious beliefs are sincere. They are people of faith. No human being has a perfect knowledge of God's love or of Christianity as an expression of that love. I do not wish to claim that I have Christianity more "right" than the evangelical athletes and organizations that are explored in this project. American sport is not entirely at fault for the compromise of the Christian message that this project examines. Religion in America has been fascinated with success since long before competitive athletics became a major cultural institution. Making accusations and laying blame only add to existing problems. I do not wish for this work to be a continuation of the problem by pointing a finger at people who have no foul intentions.

African American theologian James Cone believes that theology is based on social context, scripture, tradition, and personal experience.[6] Based on these first three elements, and a personal experience that involves my hat being in both the sphere of religious studies and the sphere of competitive athletics, I hope to provide a different theological perspective on the discussion of Christianity in sports. My goal is not to prove myself right and other athletes, organizations, and theologians wrong. I merely hope to provide a new insight, and to help us talk about our situation in order that we might open the door to more ways for God to work through this avenue of our culture.

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[6] James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1997), 99.

Chapter I

"Just Win, Baby" – Making Clear the Relationship Between Sports and Christianity

Before looking at how Christianity and competitive sports are woven together in American culture, let us look at some of the main figures responsible for the initial weaving. Eric Liddell, Billy Sunday, and Bill Glass combined their Christianity with athletics. Each did so in a different way, and each has been a major influence on the current relationship between competitive athletics and Christianity.

A Brief History – Three Patriarchs of Sportianity

The first major figure to wrestle with combining sport and Christianity was Olympic champion Eric Liddell. Liddell won the 400-meter race at the 1924 Olympics. His story became famous in the 1981 Oscar-winning film *Chariots of Fire.* In the film, the Scottish runner, played by Ian Charleson, tells his sister, who wants him to become a missionary in China, "God made me for a purpose. He also made me fast. Not to run would be to hold him in contempt."[7] After his Olympic victory, he did become a missionary in China, where he died a few years later in prison.[8] Liddell left his sport in order to pursue his calling as a Christian evangelist.

In the United States, the modern connection between sports and Christianity began with Billy Sunday. Often called the "baseball evangelist," Sunday was a

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[7] Quoted in Carol Flake, "The Spirit of Winning: Sports and the Total Man," in *Sport and* Religion, ed. Shirl J. Hoffman (Champaign, Ill.: Human Kinetics Books, 1992), 166.
[8] Ibid.

professional baseball player in the 1880s. He played for a number of major league teams and broke several base-stealing records. Like Liddell, Sunday realized that he was meant for Christian evangelism, after a conversion experience in 1886. "He left professional baseball and a salary of five hundred dollars per month," Higgs writes, "for a job with the Chicago YMCA at eighty-three dollars."[9] Even though he stopped making a living in professional sports, Sunday did not leave the sports world. In fact, he became one of the first to use it to promote Christianity. He was a key member in "Athletic Sundays." These were "evangelistic endeavors aimed at men in New York who did not go to church." Princeton football players joined Sunday and addressed capacity crowds. Their message was that "manliness and Christianity were not in the least incompatible."[10]

Sunday believed, however, that professional sports and religion could not be reconciled because sports like baseball continually broke the Sabbath commandment. Despite his reservations, Sunday's athletic background influenced his preaching. Sunday's Christianity, Higgs writes, was "a masculine, aggressive muscular Christianity...After pointing out that 'I'm still pretty handy with my dukes,' he would declare that Jesus 'was no dough-faced, lick-spittle proposition. Jesus was the greatest scrapper that ever lived." Then Sunday would often declare: " 'Let me tell you, the manliest man is the man who will acknowledge Jesus Christ.'"[11] Sunday was one of the first to use the term "winning souls for Christ."

One of the first to evangelize within the sports arena was football star Bill Glass. Glass played his college football at Baylor University, where he was an All-American. In

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[9] Robert J. Higgs, *God in the Stadium: Sports and Religion in America* (Lexington, Ky.: The University Press of Kentucky, 1995), 254.
[10] Ibid., 255.
[11] Ibid., 255-256.

the 1960s he became an All-Pro defensive lineman with the Detroit Lions and Cleveland Browns of the NFL. He attended Southwestern Theological Seminary during the NFL's off-seasons and graduated in 1963 with his degree in theology.[12] In 1965 Glass spoke to the Baptist World Congress. "He explained in great detail that just as a defensive player must get past a certain blocker to get to the quarterback, so must every man go through Jesus to get to God."[13] In the early 1990s, Glass was still working as a freelance chaplain (although he was never officially ordained) and was in constant demand as an inspirational speaker by prison groups, Baseball Chapel, and many NFL teams. He told Flake, "'When I speak to a team before a game, I find that I'm talking a Christian line, but I'm also talking motivation. I know that most players aren't into a heavy spiritual content, so you don't preach a sermon like you would in church. I talk about how I used to get myself ready before a game; it's the Christian power of positive thinking.'" Glass later commented: " 'It's in the Scripture that whatever you do, you do it with all your heart.'"[14] Glass kept his Christianity in the sports world, but his focus broadened from simply convincing people that Jesus was the way to gain salvation to shaping the Christian message to fit the competitive athlete. Glass took the sport-religion relationship in a different direction than that of Liddell and Sunday. Christianity as a winning strategy began to emerge. Through the likes of Bill Glass, the bond between these two elements of American culture strengthened as Christianity adapted to better fit the theology of winning.

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[12] Champions for Life International, "Bill Glass, Founder: Biographical Sketch," 2002, http://www.glassweb.com/billglass.htm (6 May, 2002).
[13] James T. Baker, "Are You Blocking for Me, Jesus?" in *Sport and Religion,* ed. Shirl J. Hoffman (Champaign, Ill.: Human Kinetics Books, 1992), 187.
[14] Flake, 170.

How the Game is Played: The Sports World's Various Adaptations and Uses of Christianity

The Grand Celebration

One of the greatest collegiate and professional basketball players ever to play, "Pistol Pete" Maravich, played his entire college and professional careers without winning a championship. Along with being the number one goal of "Pistol Pete," these championships were also the dream of his father and coach, Press Maravich. The day Maravich retired from basketball, he thought:

> Nearly 25 years had passed since Dad had handed me his vision of winning a championship ring. He had always wanted me to play on a winning team and be recognized as the best in the world...But through all the record-breaking years...winning a championship had eluded me. I couldn't get that ring!...I couldn't find the words to tell anybody that this was it; the 'Pistol' had fired his last shot. The diamond ring would be on someone else's finger. What would Dad say when I told him that his dream, the dream that had become Pistol Pete, was dead?[15]

Maravich is the product of a culture that measures success in wins and losses. Like many athletes, his goal was to be the best in the world and to win a championship "ring." American athletes know that no one remembers the competitor who finishes second. Our culture celebrates the winner over everyone else. Sports in America is governed by a "theology of winning."

Major collegiate and professional athletics in American culture revolve around one thing: winning. Whether it is an individual or a team, our culture celebrates the winner, and promotes winning at all costs. Athletes train hard in the off-season and compete fiercely each time they take the field of play. Winning, or one's contribution to

[15] Quoted in Rosey Grier and Kathi Mills, *Winning* (Ventura, Cal.: Regal Books, 1990), 143-144.

a winning team, determines how much money an athlete can make in contracts, endorsement deals, and prize money. Winning is everything in American sport.

While the mass media in American society may not aid in the sports world's abuse of Christianity, they do promote the theology of winning. The covers of a sports magazines such as *Sports Illustrated* or *ESPN The Magazine* celebrate winning. The winning moves of winning athletes replay time and again on highlight shows and television commercials. Scores flash across the bottom of the screen on various television stations such as ESPN News or CNN/Sports Illustrated, so the audience does not miss a beat on which teams are winning certain games. Millions more viewers watch the National Football League's (NFL) Super Bowl and Major League Baseball's (MLB) World Series than watch any regular-season contests – and for this reason, advertisers pay top dollar for 30- or 60-second spots during these broadcasts. According to Higgs, "...[S]ports, especially televised sports, are at the center of the health and wealth theology, as much as air-conditioned dog houses and brass giraffes. Indeed, the emphasis upon winning represents a corruption not only of religion but also of games."[16]

The media support this emphasis on winning by showing us image upon image of joyous winners and crestfallen losers. Players who have just won games or titles run around the field, hug one another and hold their arms in the air with one finger raised to signify that they, not those whom they have just defeated, are "number one." Losing players are shown with their heads buried in their hands, occasionally in tears.

Competitive sports in contemporary American society is also characterized by the absence of two key elements of traditional sportsmanship, elements that have to do with winning and with the treatment of the opponent. A quotation by Rudyard Kipling hangs

[16] Higgs, 295.

above the entrance to Wimbledon's Centre Court: "The true competitor treats those two great imposters, winning and losing, just the same."[17] Currently, American sports acts as if winning is the only real thing. Moreover, insofar as respectful treatment of one's opponent does not aid in winning, it is not a priority, either. In his article *Competition and God's Law,* Herbert Armstrong writes: "Competition...that takes from or harms the competitor is evil competition. Competition that helps the opponent by stimulating him to do his best or to do better, but does not harm – rather benefits – the opponent, is healthy competition. So competition can be evil, or good, depending primarily on the attitude in which it is participated."[18] Competition is capable of doing much good. It has the potential to communicate God's love, and teach competitors other important lessons such as hard work, perseverance, and teamwork. Competition is not intrinsically negative. It moves further from its positive attributes when "winning is the only thing," because it forces competitors to abandon concern for their opponents. Competitive athletics in American society is not geared toward benefiting the opponent. It is focused on winning. Players and coaches who shake hands after a competition are probably not treating winning and losing the same nor are they likely thanking their opponents for making them better through healthy competition.

When "winning is the only thing," traditional sportsmanship disappears from view. Higgs describes the attitudes that move to the forefront in their absence. "In the cult of the hero, however, where 'winning is the only thing,' there is little room for traditionally feminine virtues like humility, limitations, or moderation, and almost no

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[17] Steve Wilkinson, Ph.D., is the men's tennis coach at Gustavus Adolphus College and the director of Tennis and Life Camps. He shares this quote with his team and his campers. He has been to Wimbledon.
[18] Herbert W. Armstrong, "Competition and God's Law," in *Sport and Religion,* ed. Shirl J. Hoffman (Champaign, Ill.: Human Kinetics Books, 1992), 273.

room for pity or tenderness."[19] Competitors do not treat one another as they themselves would want to be treated. Rather, their treatment of one another revolves around gaining a competitive edge. American tennis legend Jimmy Connors exemplifies this attitude. "I don't go out there to love my enemy, I go out there to squash him."[20]

Jesus and The "Edge" – Total Release Performance, The Strength of Christ, and Prayer

To compete at their highest level and attain the result-oriented goals that our sports culture prioritizes, athletes search for the "edge," or competitive advantage: anything that makes it possible for a competitor to feel more prepared, confident, or focused than the opponent. Christianity has become a means by which athletes acquire the edge. Bill Glass, for example, "seemed to be suggesting that Christian faith offered, in practical terms, a detachment from anxiety that allowed the athlete to perform at his peak…a stimulant for success."[21]

David Robinson, an all-star center for the San Antonio Spurs of the National Basketball Association (NBA), also finds an edge in motivation through Christianity. He writes that becoming a born-again Christian in 1991:

> changed my basketball life because it's given me more of a purpose and determination…When I used to play for myself and my own glory, sometimes it was so much harder to be motivated…at what point do you have enough fame? How do you get over the little aches and pains? How do find the motivation to get up and work out and push yourself harder and harder and harder? Some people have that drive in them. But I never really had that drive…Until people pushed

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[19] Higgs, 5.
[20] Quoted in Shirl J. Hoffman, "Evangelicalism and Religious Ritual," in *Sport and Religion,* ed. Shirl J. Hoffman (Champaign, Ill.: Human Kinetics Book, 1992), 115.
[21] Flake, 170.

> me, I never went past that. God gave me a whole 'nother reason to excel. He gave me something beyond what anyone on earth has ever given me.[22]

Bryce Drew, a college basketball star at Valparaiso University, and now with the NBA's Houston Rockets uses faith's edge in actual competition. "...[I]t makes me play harder, because I know that God has blessed me to have an opportunity to play. I don't take it for granted being out there. I think that makes me more intense and want to play harder than other people would."[23]

Many athletes find that Christianity provides them with a leg up on the competition in dealing with adversity. Athletes use Jesus Christ and his unfailing strength to help them feel more calm in tense situations. Two-sport star Charlie Ward, a Heisman Trophy winner as a quarterback at Florida State University, and current point guard in the NBA, cites Philippians 4:13 ("I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.") as a source of inspiration. According to Ward, "It's (the verse) something that overcomes all obstacles. Whenever you feel like you don't have the strength to keep going, Christ can give you strength."[24] The ability to handle adverse situations both on and off of the playing field while still maintaining focus and composure is a key to winning. Christianity is a device many athletes use to handle such situations. The competitive edge takes a variety of forms. Increasingly it is taking in the form of Jesus Christ.

In competitive athletics being "right with God" may allow the athlete to compete at his or her highest level. Wes Neal, the creator of the "Total Release Performance Program," pioneered this extension of gaining the edge. Neal is often cited as being the

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[22] Quoted in Steve Hubbard, *Faith in Sports: Athletes and Their Religion On and Off the Field* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 173.
[23] Quoted in Dave Brannon, *Slam Dunk 2: Winning Players Talk About Basketball, Family, and Faith* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 67-68.
[24] Brannon, 209.

"first theologian of sportianity." His program, using carefully selected Bible verses as its core, attempts to put athletes in a mindset that will help them be as successful as possible. Neal worked for several years with athletic-ministry branch of the Campus Crusade for Christ. He went on to found the "Institute for Athletic Perfection with the premise that biblical principles were the ideal foundation for athletic training." Neal was inspired to found the institute after traveling the country with an evangelistic weight-lifting team. He often asked himself: "'How do I lift weights the way God wants me to lift them?'"[25] The answer Neal developed was his program.

> Essentially TRP – as it is called by born-again athletes – involves giving all that you have in any athletic situation, using all your talent, putting forth the supreme effort. This is what real winning is all about. Nevertheless Neal promises that athletes who engage in the 'Total Release Performance' will also probably experience victory in sport and success in the game of life. Through this 'all-out type of effort' Christian athletes can show God their gratitude for everything he has done for them; it is, in fact the supreme act of love. Furthermore TRP requires that athletes repress all negative thought such as doubt, fear, anxiety and self-interest. Above all the Christian athlete must be totally obedient to his coach because the coach is part of the chain of command that God has intended so that athletes can function at their highest level of efficiency. Losing, which Neal identifies with sin, involves not putting out, acting only for oneself, not obeying the coach. And, of course, in the game of life God is the head coach...In Neal's Christology Jesus has given the perfect 'Total Release Performance,' especially in the Garden of Gethsemane and on the Cross. These reveal Jesus' level of commitment to his mission and his winning character. Writes Neal, 'At any point Jesus could have turned back from his mission, but he was a Winner.'[26]

Neal's program uses Christianity to shape the perspectives of many Christian athletes by applying selected Christian concepts to athletic competition. Many aspects of Neal's TRP can be analyzed - and some will be in subsequent chapters - the most important, at this point, is that athletes are supposed to become better competitors by

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[25] Quoted in Flake, 168.
[26] Brian W.W. Aitken, "The Emergence of Born-Again Sport," in *Religion and Sport: The Meeting of Sacred and Profane,* ed. Charles S. Prebish (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1993), 202-203.

using TRP. Whether or not this formula works is inconclusive. Either way, TRP molds Christianity to accommodate the emphasis of winning in competitive athletics.

Another way that athletes and athletics "use" Christianity is by promoting the idea that God blesses Christians with success in sports in ways that God does not bless non-Christians. Righteous action and lifestyle are pleasing to God, and God responds by helping the righteous win. Todd Fuller, an NBA center describes an experience he and teammate Mark Price had following a tough loss.

> After we ate, we were coming back, and we were talking about the game against the Celtics and how things were at the time – pretty bad. We came back to the hotel; there was a custodian cleaning the floor at one-thirty in the morning. Mark looked at me and he said, 'I don't care how bad things get; you really have to realize the blessings we have to be able to play the game of basketball for a living and have that as a platform for our faith.' I looked at the custodian having to clean the floor at one-thirty in the morning, and I knew Mark was right.[27]

Fuller and Price express that God blesses them by allowing them to play basketball professionally and to have their professional status as faith-sharing platform.

Anthony Munoz, a Hall of Fame offensive lineman who played his entire NFL career with the Cincinnati Bengals, takes this a step further. He believes that because of his Christian faith, God has blessed him with outstanding results as an athlete. After suffering a knee injury in the first game of his senior season in college, Munoz recovered from surgery in time to play for USC in its win over Ohio State in the Rose Bowl. "My dream had come true," Munoz recalls, "But God wasn't through blessing me yet. On April 29, 1980, approximately ten minutes after the NFL draft had begun, my phone rang. It was the Cincinnati Bengals, informing me that I had been picked third out of the entire draft!" Munoz moves on to describe one of his proudest moments as a professional: "When I was named Offensive Lineman of the Year during halftime ceremonies at the

[27] Quoted in Brannon, 95.

1989 Pro Bowl, I thanked God for the strength and stamina and endurance He had given me to come so very far – even farther than I had ever dreamed!"[28]

Many "born-again" Christian athletes wholeheartedly believe that being pleasing to God is an important reason for their success in athletics. Higgs pokes fun at this attitude, but cannot deny its prevalence in the world of sports. "Indeed one could almost...amend the psalmist's verse to read...'Sit long enough and with the really right attitude, and I will put on a show the likes of which you cannot imagine!'"[29]

I grew up as a youth and high school hockey goaltender. My pregame routine consisted of stretching, putting on all of my equipment (in the same order because of superstition) with the exception of my mask, and then lumbering to the nearest bathroom for prayer. Early in my career, during squirts and peewees, the prayers were for victory. As I moved into bantams, the last level before high school, I began to realize that asking God for victory was not exactly a fair thing to do. In one instance during my last year of bantams as a ninth-grader, I specifically remember asking Jesus to let my performance be a reflection of how far our relationship had come. Even though I did not specifically ask for victory or a great performance, I implied it. I promptly went out and played my worst hockey game of that entire seventy-game season. My team nearly lost to a far-inferior opponent as a result. My coaches ridiculed me, and I thought that God was showing me that I was failing as a Christian.

My prayers shifted to asking God to put me in the right state of mind for competitive action. To this day, I can recite that portion of the prayer that I developed:

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[28] Quoted in Grier, 171-172.

[29] Robert J. Higgs, "Muscular Christianity, Holy Play, and Spiritual Exercises: Confusion About Christ in Sports and Religion," in *Sport and Religion,* ed. Shirl J. Hoffman (Champaign, Ill.: Human Kinetics Books, 1992), 98.

"God, please help me to be mentally prepared, mentally focused, mentally confident, and mentally tough." In high school, I continued to pray along these lines, but spent more time asking God to forgive my sins and thanking God for being in my life. Hitting the ice with a clear conscience as a way to be prepared for competition became the goal of my prayers. No matter what I was praying for I always prayed before games. Looking back at my hockey career, I almost certainly spent more time in prayer in the smelly bathrooms of hockey locker rooms than I did in my home or in church. I did not always ask God to help my team win, but I did always want to know that God was with me. Pep talks, pump-up music, and silent visualizations were all a part of our pregame routine. My personal routine was never complete, however, without prayer.

From youth hockey bathrooms to college basketball locker rooms and professional baseball clubhouses, competitive athletics in American culture adapts Christianity to fit the theology of winning through the use of prayer. Athletes use prayer for many purposes in competitive athletics. Asking God to aid in the achievement of success is the most common. Gerry Faust, the former head football coach at the University of Notre Dame, asked his players to say a "Hail Mary" every time the team was in a tough situation on the field. "When asked about his football-related prayers at Notre Dame, Faust replied, 'I pray to win, I pray for good weather and a good crowd, I pray that we don't have any serious injuries.'"[30] Aitken concludes that born-again Christian athletes pray with intentions similar to those of Faust. He writes: "In my judgment...most born-again athletes use prayer to influence God to help their team win or to help them perform well."[31]

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[30] Aitken in Prebish, 208.
[31] Ibid.

Prayer also occurs on a team basis. Most professional football, baseball, and basketball teams have their own team chaplains. Notre Dame football is one of the best-known college teams that pray before games. Through movies about Notre Dame football such as *Rudy*, Americans see the Fighting Irish on bended knee before they rush out of the locker room and through the tunnel onto the field. Pregame prayer is not confined to large, Division I institutions. At Gustavus Adolphus College, an NCAA Division III school affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, the football team attends a chapel service before each game. Pre-game prayer is common among church-affiliated schools, but it is certainly found elsewhere. The college basketball team at Kansas University, a public institution, was recently pictured in a *Sports Illustrated* article kneeling around its Jayhawk logo on the floor of its locker room saying its traditional pre-game "Our Father."[32] According to Shirl Hoffman: "Pregame prayers have been found to be common among college athletes and coaches, more than half of whom assume the prayer will affect the game's outcome."[33]

The uses of prayer both before and during athletic competition are far too numerous to document. The notion of prayer contributing to successful athletic performance is accepted in our sports culture to such a great extent that it is often presented in many of Hollywood's sports movies. One of the best-known sports films of the past twenty years is *Hoosiers.* It is the story of the 1952 Hickory Huskers, a basketball team from a small Indiana farm town that wins the state high school basketball championship against all odds. Before each game the Huskers play, the local reverend, who is also the father of one of the team's reserve players named Strap, reads the team a

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[32] Grant Wahl, "Hell Week," *Sports Illustrated*, 28 January 2002, 48-55.
[33] Shirl J. Hoffman, "Religion in Sport," in *Sport and Religion,* ed. Shirl J. Hoffman (Champaign, Ill.: Human Kinetics Books, 1992), 137.

passage of scripture and leads them in prayer. Before the team's biggest game, the state finals against heavily favored South Bend Central, Strap's father reads the team the story of David and Goliath.

Through Strap's story, the film suggests that prayer aids in athletic performance. In the team's regional final contest, one of the starting players has a cut on his shoulder re-opened, forcing coach Norman Dale (Gene Hackman) to put Strap in the ballgame. Coach Dale tells Strap, an uncoordinated player, not to shoot the ball unless he is under the basket and all alone. After receiving his instructions, Strap drops to one knee and bows his head in prayer. Just before play continues, Coach Dale leans down and tells his praying substitute: "Strap, God wants you on the floor."[34]

In the next scene, Strap is dominating the basketball game. He flashes fancy moves and makes difficult shots to bring the Huskers back to within striking distance. The film's theme music blares in the background until the next time-out when a shocked Coach Dale asks: "Strap, what's gotten into you?" With a smile on his face, Strap confidently replies: "The Lord, Sir. I can feel his strength."

With the game's outcome hanging in the balance, the opposing team purposely fouls the team's worst player, Ollie, who is only in the game because one of the starters has fouled out. Ollie has already air-balled his only previous free-throw attempt, and has also dribbled the basketball off of his foot and out of bounds. The opposing team calls timeout with three seconds remaining in the game and Ollie at the free-throw line. Hickory trails by one point. Coach Dale uses the break to set up his defense following the free throws that he assures everyone Ollie will make. The team goes into its huddle before the timeout is over, and when it breaks, two hands are still linked together. Strap

[34] *Hoosiers,* dir. David Anspaugh, 111 min., MGM, 1986, videocassette.

is on one knee still holding Ollie's hand. The players appear confused, as they stand pinned in by the joined hands. Coach Dale slaps the linked hands and says: "Make it a good one, Strap." Ollie heads out to the court and sinks his two free throws to send the Huskers to the state finals.

Hoosiers is a wonderful film that always inspires those who view it. It is a beautiful example of what a team can accomplish through hard work, trust and belief in one another, and great determination in spite of the odds. It is also a prime example of how our sports culture views prayer in athletics. Strap turned in an amazing performance after saying his prayer. Ollie's successful free throws with the game on the line sell the idea that God was on the side of the Huskers because of Strap's prayer in the team huddle. This may not have been the movie's intention, but it is implied. Prayer is a tool used to gain better results, to help achieve victory – the number one goal of competitive athletics in American culture.

The explicit purpose of pregame prayer may not always be to aid in winning. In many cases the prayer may simply be a matter of continuing tradition. Many athletes pray because it is something that their team has been doing long before they were members of it. Prayer is also often used to invoke God's presence at an athletic event. Hoffman argues, however, whatever the intention of those who pray, prayer is a tool for dealing with the anxiety that surrounds competition that has a goal of winning.

> Those close to the athletic scene understand that pregame prayers often are quite sincere, not occasions for asking for a victory as much as asking God's presence and blessing on the event. Athletes who have integrated religion into all aspects of their lives and who customarily pray before important events in their lives also are likely to pray before a big athletic event in which their performance will be viewed and evaluated publicly and in which the prospect of physical injury looms on the horizon. Yet even the sincerest form of prayer has a psychological payoff,

> and when offered before athletic contests it can be a powerful mechanism for dealing with pregame anxiety.[35]

Pregame prayer is sincere. Kneeling over toilets while wearing all of my goaltending equipment I prayed prayers of deep sincerity. Even when they do not ask God for victory or high-level performance, sincere prayers are a means by which athletes attempt to gain the priceless competitive edge. Pregame prayer lessened the nervousness that I felt before games, and as Hoffman points out, it has the same effect on many other athletes. Pregame prayer is an edge-giving tool that aids in athletes' achievement of success. Winning is the primary goal, and pregame prayer a means to achieve it. In this way, irrespective of the words of the prayer, Christianity adapts to fit the theology of winning.

The Christology of Sport

American sports and evangelical Christianity mold Christianity to embrace a theology of winning with the development of a unique Christology. Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" The answer given by most Christians involved in competitive athletics would sound something like this: "One hell of a good ballplayer!" Again, the importance of winning and high-level performance shapes the way in which Christianity is brought to sports. Jesus Christ is portrayed to athletes as a model of the perfect competitor. He would give one hundred percent; he would be tough, fair, and he would be a winner. Many pieces of literature on Christianity in athletics quote Norman Vincent Peale: "If Jesus were alive today, he would be at the Super Bowl."[36]

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[35] Hoffman, "Religion in Sport," 137.
[36] quoted in Flake, 161.

Our culture's goals in competitive athletics alter the identification of Jesus. "The resurgence of evangelicalism in America had brought with it a revival of muscular Christianity and a return to the social Darwinism of the athletic arena. Jesus the teacher had become Christ the competitor."[37] Often, those trying to convince athletes, fans, and the media that born-again Christian athletes are not "soft" because of their Christianity use this view of Christ. "Fritz Peterson, a member of Baseball Chapel in Chicago area, heatedly denied the placidity sometimes attributed to devout players... 'If Jesus Christ was sliding into second base, he would knock the second baseman into left field to break up the double play. Christ might not throw a spitball but he would play hard within the rules.'"[38]

The image of Jesus the competitor is also used in the sale and promotion of Christianity. As far back as Billy Sunday, Christ the competitor was portrayed as a hard-nosed athlete. "He (Sunday) would declare that Jesus 'was no dough-faced, lick-spittle proposition. Jesus was the greatest scrapper that ever lived.'"[39] Not only was Jesus a tough competitor, but also in the event that he ever went a few rounds with a member of the opposition, you could count on Jesus giving the guy a pretty good butt kicking. Wes Neal stays away from Jesus the fighter, but sticks with Jesus the competitor. Recall Neal's claim that, "At any point Jesus could have turned back from his mission, but he was a Winner."[40] According to Deford: " 'Jesus has been transformed, emerging anew as a holler guy, a hustler, a give it 100 percenter.'"[41] This transformed Jesus is what

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[37] Flake, 163.
[38] Ibid., 167.
[39] Higgs, 255-256.
[40] quoted in Aitken in Prebish, 203.
[41] Ibid.

Christian outreach organizations such as FCA and Athletes in Action (AIA) give their audience. This is the Jesus whom successful athletes promote.

American culture places the highest value on winners. A logical way to promote Jesus Christ as a savior, and to convince people to believe in him and become born-again is to make him the champion of all winners. This is exactly what the theology of winning does. "Dave Rowe, former all-pro defensive tackle and a devout Christian...suggested at the King College Super Bowl luncheon in Bristol, Tennessee, that, 'if Jesus Christ had been an athlete, he'd be the greatest ever.'"[42] People in our culture look up to winners and pattern themselves after those who are successful. If the ultimate goal and value is to win, who would not want to believe in a Christ who cannot lose? Jesus Christ the winner is the competitive Christ of American competitive sport. Because of the celebration of winning, the two appear to be perfect match.

"Winning Souls for Christ" – The Goal of Conversion

Many athletes and a few major Christian outreach organizations use successful performance to sell Christianity. "In Muscular Christianity emphasis is placed upon the body as a means of bringing others to Christ...The Muscular Christian qualifies as a witness because of his success in worldly competition."[43] Successful athletic performance gains an audience in American culture. Because of the large number of people that sports are able to reach, they are used by evangelical Christianity to promote

[42] Higgs, 12.
[43] Higgs in Hoffman, 90.

Christ. "Sports sells; it is one of the best vehicles for getting any message across. Top-name Christian athletes can make born-again Christianity saleable."[44]

Two organizations that promote Christianity in this way are FCA and AIA. Aitken describes the operation of FCA: "Its primary method involves using nationally known athletes to promote Bible fellowship groups in local communities. These groups, called 'huddles,' hold regular meetings in schools, churches and locker rooms where members pray, give witness and provide religious support for each other."[45] AIA works in a similar way. It puts together teams of born-again Christians in various sports; these athletes travel the globe and compete against college and professional teams. During intermissions and following games, the team members share testimonies and pass out copies of the New Testament. The goal of the organization is to " 'use the ready-made platform of sports to share the adventure and excitement of following Christ.'"[46] Put more simply, they want to convert people that they reach through athletics to evangelical Christianity. They want to produce born again Christians. Frank Deford describes the simple goals of these organizations: "...first, convert the athletes, who are among the most visible individuals in our society, then, use these stars for what is generally known in the business as 'outreach,' an up-to-date rendering of the old fashioned phrase 'missionary work.'"[47] Aitken continues: "No matter what the terminology, Christian sports organizations do engage in conversion as their primary task."[48]

Ultimately these organizations place a premium on success and successful athletes because of their necessary role in accomplishing conversion. Flake writes:

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[44] Aitken in Prebish, 201.
[45] Ibid., 198.
[46] Ibid., 199.
[47] Quoted in Aitken in Prebish, 200.
[48] Aitken in Prebish, 200.

> Particularly effective for many years in winning converts were the Athletes in Action...competing as a kind of paraprofessional league but usually managing to score a high percentage of wins against secular teams who deigned to play them. However, their effectiveness in converting teenagers seemed dependent on their ability to deliver points. Said an AIA basketball player, 'It's important for us to win, not because God wants winners, but because Americans do.'[49]

Using a successful performance to sell Christianity often happens unintentionally, such as with public displays of thanksgiving or glorification. Organizations such as FCA and AIA unapologetically use athletic success for the explicit purposes of promoting Christianity and saving souls. Hall of Fame football coach Tom Landry, formerly of the Dallas Cowboys and longtime supporter of FCA, expresses this promotion: " 'I hope I can be an example. My ambition is to bring people to Christ. It's the only thing. Even the Super Bowl is a platform for that.'"[50]

"We've Got Jesus, Yes We Do! We've Got Jesus, How 'Bout You?" – Selling Christianity Through Athletics

The use of the athletic arena to promote Jesus Christ as *the way,* superior to other religions, to know God is another way that sports and Christianity are woven together. In American culture, competitive athletics generates a huge viewing audience both on-site and on television. This makes sporting events ideal opportunities to advertise for Jesus. Fans and organizations hang banners at virtually every stadium in professional sports. Often these banners include references to Bible verses, the most common of which is John 3:16. These advertisements fit in with those for commercial products and fan clubs. A fan who had never seen a Biblical reference could easily wonder what team John plays for and why he wears jersey number three hundred-sixteen.

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[49] Flake, 166.
[50] Quoted in Flake, 174.

As visible as the banners are, though, there is no more visible in our sports culture than the winner's circle. The mass media places a premium on the post-game thoughts of winning athletes, coaches, and teams. Many Christian athletes use their place in this circle to proclaim Jesus Christ as the reason for their success and as the savior of the world. In countless post-game interviews athletes respond to the interviewer's first question – whatever it may be - with a response that almost sounds rehearsed and usually takes this form: "I just want to give all the thanks, praise, and glory to God and to my lord and savior Jesus Christ, who made all of this possible."

Jim Harbaugh, an NFL quarterback who played for the Indianapolis Colts, gave the credit to God in each of his interviews during the 1995 NFL playoffs. "Buoyed by his faith in God and his teammates' faith in him, he won three games in the fourth quarter to earn the nickname 'Captain Comeback,' the league passing title, the Pro Bowl, and an appearance in the conference championship game...He gave praise to God every time a TV camera rolled live."[51] Former heavyweight boxing champion Evander Holyfield speaks the same language in his post-fight interviews. In 1997, the New England Patriots marched through the AFC playoffs and into the Super Bowl. Before responding to an interviewer's first question, Patriots' fullback Keith Byars exclaimed, "First, I want to give honor to God, through whom all blessings flow." At the end of the interview, he said, "Sometimes the Lord closes one door and opens another. Hallelujah!"[52]

No discussion of athletes proclaiming Jesus from the trophy stand is complete without citing St. Louis Rams quarterback Kurt Warner. His story is both inspiring and unlikely in American sports. He played college football at Division IAA University of

[51] Hubbard, 17.
[52] Ibid., 72.

Northern Iowa in the early 90's. He then went on to play for the Iowa Barnstormers of the Arena Football League from 1995-1997, an unlikely career development for a player who would eventually win the Super Bowl and league MVP honors. From the arena league, Warner moved on to NFL Europe in 1998. Finally the NFL's St. Louis Rams picked him up as a reserve player after one season with the Amsterdam Admirals. When their starting quarterback, Trent Green suffered a knee injury at the start of the 1999 season, Warner went from stocking shelves in a Cedar Falls, Iowa, Hy-Vee grocery store to being a starting quarterback in the NFL. He made the most of his opportunity, putting together one of the most impressive passing seasons in NFL history.

In his book *All Things Possible,* Warner describes the 1999 season.

> I said a few games into the season that 'the Lord has big plans for this team.' What I meant was that I believed God would use the situation whether it was inside our locker room or in front of millions of people after winning the Super Bowl, to glorify his kingdom...I do believe that he had something special in store for our particular team because of the strong Christian base we had and the ability we had to touch a lot of lives.[53]

Throughout the season, Warner repeatedly "gave the glory to God" in interviews. "I'm not just thanking God for the victory," he writes, "I'm thanking him for everything he does in my life. It's my opportunity to profess in front of everybody that I live my life for Jesus...When I thank him after a game I'm thanking him for every bit of influence, guidance, wisdom, talent, understanding and protection he gives me in every situation." Finally, Warner asserts: "I'm going to stand up on every mountain – or podium – and shout Jesus' name and praise him for everything that happens in my life."[54]

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[53] Kurt Warner with Michael Silver. *All Things Possible: My Story of Faith, Football, and the Miracle Season* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2000), 210.
[54] Ibid., 210, 242.

Flake characterizes Christian athletes as being "too eager to bear the banners and wear the uniforms of success."[55] At the end of her discussion of Tom Landry, she notes: "The bottom line for Tom Landry, as for any nonreligious coach, was winning."[56] Essentially, she is criticizing a response to the result-oriented goals of sports and athletes in American culture. In order to better achieve these goals and fit neatly with the vehicle of sport that is so effective in reaching people and selling Christianity, the religion is being warped. Christianity and Jesus Christ are being shaped by athletes, religious outreach organizations, and many Christian denominations to fit a society of winners. "The fact is that 'Born-Again Sport,' like fundamentalist Christianity, holds to a very traditionalist view of North American life where winning is a virtue."[57] Theologically, however, the molding of Christianity based on this virtue as described in this chapter is problematic. From here, we can begin to identify some of the major problems.

[55] Flake, 175.
[56] Ibid., 174.
[57] Aitken in Prebish, 207.

Chapter II

Foul Ball – The Theology of Winning Distorts Christianity

Christianity

The theology of winning's adoption and adaptation of Christianity distorts the essence of Christianity. Before exploring five of the major distortions stemming from the ways that competitive athletics embrace Christianity as described in the previous chapter, I must first deal with defining the essence of Christianity. The meaning or essence of Christianity is a topic that is far too vast for the reach of this project. It is important, however, to give a clear definition of what, exactly, is being distorted.

My definition comes from, both consciously and unconsciously, many sources. It is incomplete, a work in progress. It begins with the simple claim that God loves us, as human beings unconditionally as God's creation – just as we are. God expresses this love in numerous ways. For one who is a part of the Christian story, God expressed this love on earth most clearly and profoundly through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Paul Tillich writes, "The personal encounter with God and the reunion with him are the heart of all genuine religion."[58] Christianity is certainly no exception. Human beings are in a state of existential estrangement from God. We are in search of the union with God that is the concern of all religion. Only God's grace reconciles this

[58] Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume II: Existence and the Christ* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963), 86.

estrangement. "Grace does not destroy essential freedom; but it does what freedom under the conditions of existence cannot do, namely, it reunites the estranged."[59] Nothing human beings do can achieve this reunification. "Nevertheless, the bondage of the will is a universal fact. It is the inability of man to break through his estrangement. In spite of the power of his finite freedom, he is unable to achieve the reunion with God. In the realm of finite relations, all decisions are expressions of man's essential freedom. But they do not bring reunion with God."[60] Only God's grace brings about this reunion. In the Christian story, Jesus is the mediator of God's grace. Tillich asserts that a function of the Mediator is to reunite the estranged. "He is Mediator in so far as he is supposed to reconcile. He represents God toward man and man toward God. Both elements of the idea of the mediator have been applied to Jesus as the Christ. In his face we see the face of God, and in him we experience the reconciling will of God; in both respects he is the Mediator."[61]

In short, God loves human beings unconditionally, and reconciles them to God through grace. For those who are a part of the Christian story, Jesus Christ is the most perfect communication of this love and grace. People who call themselves "Christian" must own up to the fact that the story upon which they base their life is rests on the claim that God's love is expressed through a humiliating death on a cross. Christians live by the claim that through this man who died on the cross, they have reunion with God.

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[59] Ibid., 79.
[60] Ibid., 78.
[61] Ibid., 169.

God's Grace Goes to Winners Only?

With help from Paul Tillich, we have established grounds upon which the theology of winning, which drives American culture's competitive sports, misuses and misrepresents Christianity. The first issue is quite simple, but very problematic. The grand celebration of winning and the various uses of Christianity in this endeavor fail to communicate God's grace or Jesus' life and death as an expression of it. Because of the importance of winning, our culture values the winner more than the loser. This misrepresents God's love for us as God's creation. No matter what we do, we cannot bring ourselves into greater unification with God. Winning a championship ring or an MVP trophy can certainly be a wonderful experience that teaches us about ourselves and rewards hard work, team unity, and determination. They do not, however, produce the type of reunion or encounter with God that Tillich describes. Just as victory does not bring one into reunion with God, it does not adhere to the essence of Christianity to claim that God and Christ are glorified by victory or successful performance. God's grace is extended to us all because we are God's creation.

To communicate that only winning or success glorifies God ignores this key idea. Winning does not glorify God more than losing because God values the winner and the loser equally. The loser is as capable as the winner of glorifying God and being evidence to God's unconditional love through Jesus. If the fourth-string quarterback who never saw game action for the team that finished the NFL season with the worst record stood up and said: "I just want to give all of the praise and glory to God and our savior Jesus Christ," he would be glorifying God to the same extent that Kurt Warner did after

winning the Super Bowl. Of course, because of the premium placed on winning, we rarely (if ever) see this type of rhetoric coming from someone outside the winner's circle.

The grand celebration of winning also fails to communicate that Jesus is an expression of God's unconditional love. This expression is given to all of God's creation, but it is not the most perfect expression of God's love for humanity to those who are of a religious story other than Christianity. Winning, glorifying God through winning, being "right with God" in order to be more successful, or any other ways in which Jesus Christ is equated with the achievement of result-oriented goals, is not representative of this expression of God's love and grace. God's love is for winners, losers, and everyone else. Quite simply, American competitive sports fail to represent this key idea of the Christian story. And with a continued emphasis on winning and all that stems from it, our sports will never be capable of portraying God's love to those who play or to those who watch and cheer.

Jesus Equals Success

The second major problem with competitive athletics' use of Christianity is that it sells Christianity as a means by which athletes, and Americans in general, can become more successful. In addition to being a misrepresentation of God's love for humanity, this concept fundamentally changes the identity and work of Jesus as the Christ. Christ gives athletes the edge if they feel that they are "right" with him. Former New England Patriot, John Hannah, describes this feeling: " 'When I have a right relationship with Christ, I have found that I can play the game more relaxed and make fewer mistakes.'"[62] Christ becomes the ultimate performance-enhancing supplement. "For some players, it

[62] Quoted in Flake, 168.

seemed Christ was the ultimate placebo. They called on Jesus as the perfect coach with the perfect game plan, the valiant lineman who could block out a path for them, the omniscient spectator whose love and enthusiasm never faltered...Faith helped them to conquer fear, weariness, slumps, and negative attitudes."[63]

I cannot argue that Christ is not capable of doing or being all these things, or that faith does not allow people to endure difficult times in life; for an athlete, these times include fear, weariness, slumps, and negative attitudes. Distortion of Christianity occurs, however, when Jesus is sold as the perfect coach or the perfect lineman. Competitive athletes rarely, if ever, present or view Jesus as the ultimate expression of God's unconditional love. Their perception of Jesus may be sincere, but it warps the essence of the Christian message by making Jesus a tool for success as opposed to a communicator or representation of God's love.

Paul Tillich describes the Christ as uniting in itself "the infinity of the transcendent divinity and the finitude of men." This is one way in which Christ is the mediator of God's love and grace. "The other is his function to reunite what is estranged."[64] Jesus shows the face of God to humanity. That is an integral part of the Christian story. Jesus transforming an athlete into a better competitor is not. Jesus' function as the Christ is not to answer prayers for victory and influence the outcomes of sporting events. He is not supposed to communicate a greater love for some teams or athletes than for others, and he is not supposed to provide a competitive edge that leads to victory. Winners do not glorify God more than losers, and God's love is not made more

[63] Flake, 168.
[64] Tillich, 169.

available to those who are successful in athletic competition. Jesus represents God's love, a love that is for all of God's creation.

The theology of winning equates Jesus with success. Being an ultimate expression of God's love is quite an accomplishment, to say the least. This is not expressed as a successful endeavor by the sports world, however, because God's love is for everyone. There are no "losers." In order for success to exist in the eyes of competitive athletics in American culture, there must be a winner, and by definition, a loser. Thus the theology of winning sells Jesus as a means to becoming successful, even though doing so presents a Christology and a soteriology that are distorting to the essence of Christianity.

Jesus the Winner

The third problematic area with the theology of winning's adoption and adaptation of Christianity surrounds the patterning of the competitor after Jesus. Jesus as the perfect model for the competitive athlete distorts the Christian story in two important ways. First, the concern of Jesus of Nazareth for the "other" or "the least of these" is lost. The second problem in seeing Jesus as the winner of winners is that it is simply inaccurate. Based on the social standards of his time, Jesus was a "loser." The American culture's fascination with winning allows many Christians to lose sight of this aspect of Jesus' life.

Sports in American culture is about winning at any cost. There is little concern for the opponent, especially with the vanishing of traditional sportsmanship. Many athletes, such as former major leaguer Sid Bream, choose to disregard Jesus' concern for

the other. " 'If a pitcher is taking a potshot at our batters, and I know he is, I would definitely do something about it. When Christ said to turn the other cheek, he wasn't talking about that.'"[65] In taking Jesus as a model for the competitive athlete, Christians such as Wes Neal and Billy Sunday focus only on Jesus' effort and the winning results that Jesus would have certainly obtained.

Jesus may have had the physical ability to be an outstanding athlete. Unfortunately, he never got the chance to play in high school or college, and he died before he would have been old enough for the sports historians to judge whether or not any professional career he may have had was a success. Jesus Christ was not an athlete. If we are looking to use him as a model for an athlete, we have no basis upon which to judge him as a physical competitor. He did, however, leave us with a few thoughts on how to treat one another, and how to care for those less fortunate than ourselves. Professional athletics in American culture choose to place far less emphasis on these aspects of Jesus' life. Instead, the focus is on their speculation of Jesus as the ultimate athlete. The Jesus who said, "love your neighbor as yourself," and "as you do to the least of my brethren, you do to me," as well as "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you," is lost in favor of the Jesus who triumphs over the entire world, and who would certainly win championships.

Jesus cared for the victims of his time. He was a friend to the poor and to the suffering. In effect, he hung out with those whom society would label "losers." Latin American liberation theologian Jon Sobrino calls Jesus Christ: "the Liberator, the

[65] Quoted in Higgs, 12.

absolute mediator of the Reign of God to the poor."[66] Jesus lived with great concern for the losers. According to Sobrino, he still acts in history and inspires us, as his followers, to continue to live with that concern. Athletics in American culture present Jesus as being for winners. The rhetoric is that Christ represents the greatest success story in all of history and that because of this he speaks to and serves winners. This may be true, but his role as the absolute mediator of God's reign to the losers of the world, both in his time and throughout history, is a more accurate portrayal.

Not only did Jesus associate with losers, but he, himself, was a loser in many respects. Hoffman describes the tension between winning and losing that arises when the sports world turns the Christian message a story of winning:

> Christian athletes confront an inevitable contradiction. Sport which celebrates the myth of success is harnessed to a theology that often stresses the importance of losing. Sport which symbolizes the morality of self-reliance and teaches the just rewards of hard work is used to propagate a theology dominated by the radicalism of grace (the first shall be last and the last shall be first). Sport, a microcosm of meritocracy, is used to celebrate a religion that says that all are unworthy and undeserving.[67]

This tension becomes even more pronounced when we see Jesus himself as a loser. Jesus went against the norm in his society. As a Jew, he often bucked the system. He overturned tables in the temple, and he ate with the wrong people, and even claimed God gave him the power to perform miracles. He was a thorn in the side of the Roman government, a pest who did nothing but cause problems. For his efforts, he was eventually sentenced to die the most humiliating and painful death of his time. He was crucified between two other criminals. Jack Saarela, former chairperson of the Campus

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[66] Jon Sobrino, "Systematic Christology: Jesus Christ, the Absolute Mediator of the Reign of God," in *Systematic Theology: Perspectives from Liberation Theology*, eds. Jon Sobrino and Ignacio Ellacuria (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1996), 144.
[67] Quoted in Aitken in Prebish, 203.

Ministry Cooperative at the University of Florida notes that this concept of Jesus is often lost in our society:

> I have problems with ministries that parade winners up on a stage – athletes, entertainers. The implication is if you accept Christ, you can be a winner, too. It's not any more honest than Madison Avenue saying if you want to be a winning person, drink a certain beer. To me, Christianity is about a man who died on a cross. He was a loser. He appealed to the losers in society.[68]

The last place that anyone would ever look to find God's most pronounced loving presence on earth would be the cross. I am certain that I would not have looked there if I had lived during Jesus' time. In fact, I am not convinced that I would have followed an outcast such as Jesus of Nazareth in the first place. We are trained to look at those who are successful, and to emulate them. Competitive athletics reinforces this notion through its celebration of winners and by equating Christianity with winning.

Jesus the loser is still capable of representing God's love for creation. In fact, Martin Luther's theology of the cross presents the idea that this is exactly where God's love is most profound. "The central insight of Luther's *theologia crucis* was that God is revealed in the cross of Christ. Any attempt to seek God elsewhere will fail."[69] Solberg calls Luther's theology of the cross "a critique leveled against the official theology of his day."[70] It also serves as a critique against the theology of winning, which seeks God atop the winner's podium. Jesus the winner would not be hanging on a cross. I suspect that Luther would label Wes Neal, Billy Sunday, and others who proclaim Jesus the winner theologians of glory. "A theologian of glory, Luther argued, expects God to look powerful, mighty, beautiful, radiant, glorious – in a word, God-like. Certainly the

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[68] Quoted in Higgs, 14.
[69] Mary M. Solberg, *Compelling Knowledge: A Feminist Proposal for an Epistemology of the Cross* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1997), 71.
[70] Ibid., 73.

appalling spectacle of crucifixion outside the city walls is not."[71] Competitive athletics in American culture is full of theologians of glory. It seems that God should be winning all of the shiny trophies.

Luther's theology of the cross brings us back to the cross, and to the essence of the Christian story – Jesus as an ultimate expression of God's love. God is revealed through Christ on the cross, the most unglorified of places in the eyes of human beings. Jesus was a loser in the eyes of his contemporaries. Because of this status and because sin makes us all "losers," however, he was able to reveal God to humanity. He need not adopt the status of a winner in order to do so in our culture, either.

Safe or Out? The Issue of Salvation

The adoption of Christianity by competitive athletics opens the door to the use of certain sports metaphors for the description of religious ideas. The theology of winning applies the classic sports metaphor of winning and losing to the issue of salvation. The most common understanding of Christian salvation proclaimed in sports is otherworldly. Victory in athletic competition provides an easy comparison to winning the prize of heaven at the conclusion of one's life on earth. A culture transfixed with winning and losing can easily identify with going to heaven or going to hell. Salvation is viewed as the result that comes at the end of the game. If one plays well enough, then one earns victory – a place high in the sky where angels never stop singing. If one loses, however, one will spend all of eternity in the flames of hell. According to Billy Sunday, the issue is

[71] Ibid., 72.

quite clear: " 'You are going to live forever in heaven or you are going to live forever in hell. There's no other place – just the two...It's up to you and you must decide now.'"[72]

Salvation becomes even more cut-and-dried when the means by which it is earned is the choice one makes to accept Jesus Christ as one's personal lord and savior. This is the concept of salvation that dominates the Christianity that competitive athletics in American culture adopts. It is the salvation of FCA and AIA, and it the driving force behind the evangelism that accompanies athletics. The metaphor continues as those who are "saved" attempt to "win souls for Christ." Aitken writes: "Success equals the number of people who have been saved or who have heard their testimonies."[73] At AIA basketball games, "fans are asked to fill out cards to note whether they have received Christ during the evening or to simply request more information."[74] Salvation is about being "born-again" as a result of what Christ does in one's life and for the status of one's eternal life *after* one has made the choice to accept Christ.

Conversion of others is the goal of those who subscribe to this view of salvation and who are already "saved." Two summers ago, while working at Tennis and Life Camps on the campus of Gustavus Adolphus College, I encountered some friends who were on campus for a week helping administer an FCA summer camp. I was visiting with them on the last night of their camp after our campers were in their rooms for the night. I found myself in a conversation with several of the camp's college-age "huddle leaders." The director of these leaders, a high school teacher, was asking them if they were aware of how many of their huddle members were saved. Various percentages were reported. He then stressed to the huddle leaders the importance of praying a prayer of

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[72] Quoted in Higgs, 255.
[73] Aitken in Prebish, 200-201.
[74] Ibid.,199.

salvation with their "un-saved" campers in order that the campers be saved before leaving camp.

At the end of Kurt Warner's book *All Things Possible,* the all-pro quarterback writes: "In the preceding chapters, you've read some of the highlights of my life – the challenges and the breakthroughs. Every sentence and chapter leads me to this central point: Jesus changed my life...and he can change yours too. Simply pray this prayer." Warner presents a simple prayer that reads: "Lord Jesus, you know everything about me. Please forgive me for all the wrong things I've ever said or done. I know that you died for my sins and rose from the dead. Please come into my life and be my Lord. Help me follow you always. Amen."[75] Not only does this conclusion make Warner's book a typical evangelical advertisement for the success that Jesus Christ can bring to one's life, but is also represents the goal of conversion that accompanies the salvation that is rampant in competitive athletics. The prescription for gaining salvation is clear: simply pray this prayer. One can be like the super bowl MVP and be saved through Jesus Christ by praying four lines of text.

Salvation is a complex issue. I doubt that anyone has established an authoritative definition of salvation – if such a definition exists. Even though the topic is challenging, I can comfortably argue (with the help of Tillich, Sobrino, and Carlos Bravo) that the evangelical concept of salvation that dominates the sports world is problematic and incomplete. Although he is not responding to Christianity in competitive athletics, Tillich describes the concept of salvation that is prevalent in the sports world in terms of avoidance of ultimate negativity. "The term 'salvation' has as many connotations as there are negativities from which salvation is needed...Ultimate negativity is called

[75] Warner, last page (no page number given).

condemnation or eternal death...the exclusion from eternal life. In the overwhelming majority of occasions in which the word 'salvation' or the phrase 'being saved' is used, it refers to salvation from this ultimate negativity."[76] Tillich suggests a different meaning of salvation: "With respect to both the original meaning of salvation (from *salvus,* 'healed') and our present situation, it may be adequate to interpret salvation as 'healing.' It corresponds to the state of estrangement as the main characteristic of existence. In this sense, healing means reuniting that which is estranged."[77]

Tillich describes an issue that is the first of two main problems with the evangelical model of salvation - exclusivity:

> It is the belief that salvation is either total or non-existent. Total salvation, in this view, is identical with being taken into the state of ultimate blessedness and is the opposite of total condemnation to everlasting pain or eternal death. If, then, the salvation to eternal life is made dependent upon the encounter with Jesus as the Christ and the acceptance of his saving power, only a small number of human beings will ever reach salvation. The others, either through a divine decree or through the destiny which came upon them from Adam's fall or thorough their own guilt, are condemned to exclusion from eternal life.[78]

The concept of salvation that is tied exclusively to eternal life through Jesus Christ limits salvation to those who are aware of Jesus Christ and who accept his saving power. For everyone else in the world, the ball has simply not bounced his or her way when it comes to eternal life.

Tillich's words also point out the second problem with salvation equaling eternal life. Salvation becomes dependent upon a human action, namely the acceptance of Christ, for one could seemingly be aware of the saving power of Christ but not accept it. This model is problematic if we recall Tillich's assertion that, "in spite of the power of

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[76] Tillich, 165.
[77] Ibid., 166.
[78] Ibid., 167.

his finite freedom, he is unable to achieve the reunion with God. In the realm of finite relations, all decisions are expressions of man's essential freedom. But they do not bring reunion with God." Tillich also declares: "Attempts to overcome estrangement within the power of one's estranged existence lead to hard toil and tragic failure."[79] One cannot choose to be saved, which is precisely what many Christian athletes, like Kurt Warner, and many Christian athletic outreach organizations, like FCA and AIA, are proposing people do.

Along with being exclusive and based upon human action, the model of salvation that most often accompanies competitive athletics in American culture is problematic because its focus is otherworldly. I must admit that my concept of salvation has an otherworldly component. I hope for eternal life, and I hope that my loved ones who have died are enjoying it at this moment. There is, however, little if any description in the Bible as to what this eternal life is like. Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead, and is himself resurrected, but there are no stories about what it is like in heaven - or hell, for that matter. We are stuck with images of fluffy white clouds and floating angels for heaven, and a devil with horns and a pointy beard surrounded by flames and damned souls sweating as they shovel coal into the eternal furnace for hell. Our culture is preoccupied with these images and with what happens when we close our eyes for the last time. I cannot honestly say that I am immune to such thoughts, but I am not convinced that at the heart of salvation lies the answer to the question of what happens when we die. Again, I will use Tillich's words to provide a different image: "Only if

[79] Ibid., 79-80.

salvation is understood as healing and saving power through the New Being in all history is the problem put on another level."[80]

This other dimension has to do with salvation in the here and now. Carlos Bravo combines a hope of eternal life with an inspiration for the present in his view of salvation:

> Jesus' whole life is a work of salvation...It is the totality of the mystery of his passage through our history which makes total liberation possible for us, both historically and escchatologically, as a task and a gift, for 'now and not yet.' We are saved not because he reveals to us a new, more demanding law than the first, but because he gives us a new capacity, a Spirit to enable us to live as children of the Father, as brothers and sisters of our fellow human beings. This is how we pursue Jesus' cause. And this is how Jesus is fully the Liberator.[81]

This idea of salvation as a gift for the now as well as the not yet is missing from the sports world's concept of salvation. With the free gift of salvation comes a responsibility. We must do more than live our lives with the comfortable complacence of knowing that we will go to heaven. Jesus' life enables us to live with a new capacity to care for our fellow human beings and continue Jesus' mission in our time. These beautifully inspiring aspects of salvation are not communicated to or by America's competitive athletics.

Jon Sobrino expresses a view of salvation similar to that of Bravo. He writes: "Jesus' resurrection is liberative because it enables and inspires people to live in history itself as risen ones, as persons raised; because it enables and inspires people to live the following of Jesus, too, as a reflection of the fulfilling, triumphal note of the resurrection with indestructible hope, freedom, and joy."[82] Hope, freedom, and joy come, not from the belief that one will end up in heaven, or from a victory that glorifies God, but from

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[80] Ibid., 167.
[81] Carlos Bravo, "Jesus of Nazareth, Christ the Liberator," in *Systematic Theology: Perspectives from Liberation Theology,* eds. Jon Sobrino and Ignacio Ellacuria (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1996), 122.
[82] Sobrino, 140.

the gift of the power to live a life that pursues Jesus' cause. The concern for the other is not to convert them to Christianity, or to help them pray a simple prayer in an effort to save themselves. Rather, we demonstrate the concern by treating them as a brother or sister, here and now. Sobrino makes no mention of heaven or hell. For him, salvation is about living a life following Jesus here on earth.

There is so much that can be discussed when it comes to the issue of salvation. Bravo, Sobrino and Tillich only scratch the surface. What they propose, however, is that salvation is more than praying a prayer inviting Jesus into one's life and earning eternal life in heaven with some big wins on the athletic field along the way. Salvation cannot be earned, and it has much more to do with living in the present than the evangelical model that is abundant in American culture would have us believe.

Finally, salvation is not as exclusive as many Christians think it is. I am not comfortable devising a formula that determines who has salvation and who does not. This is God's work. I do think, however, that God wants to be reunited with more of humanity than the small portion that is knowing and accepting of Jesus' saving power. I am confident that God can extend this healing in more ways than one. Tillich writes: "In some degree all men participate in the healing power of the New Being. Otherwise they would have no being. The self-destructive consequences of estrangement would have destroyed them. But no men are totally healed, not even those who have encountered the healing power as it appears in Jesus as the Christ."[83] This idea does not lend itself to an easy acceptance by a culture preoccupied with winning and losing. The metaphor that equates going to heaven with victory is so easily adaptable to competitive athletics that its replacement will be accompanied by great difficulty.

[83] Tillich, 167.

Competitive Religion

"In the view of Malcolm X, the 1964 heavyweight championship title bout between Sonny Liston and Muhammad Ali, the Cassius Clay, had special significance... 'This fight is the truth...It's the Cross and the Crescent fighting in the prize ring – for the first time. It's a modern crusade."[84] In November of 1996 Evander Holyfield fought Mike Tyson for the World Boxing Association's heavyweight championship. Holyfield warmed up to gospel songs, wore "Philippians 4:13" on his trunks. A heavy underdog, Holyfield went on to defeat Tyson, a recent convert to Islam, with a technical knockout in the eleventh round. Following his victory, Holyfield declared: " 'You can't choose against God...I did what it took to win. What the spirit leads me to do, I do.'"[85] The new champion believed that he won the fight because his Christian God was bigger and better than Tyson's Muslim God. These stories illustrate the final problem with the theology of winning's adoption of Christianity: muscular Christianity makes religion competitive.[86]

The use of victory or high-level performance to proclaim Christianity as something others ought to have puts down other religions and religious truths. This misrepresents God's love for humanity. So often, Christianity in American culture is about proclaiming exclusivity. Because Jesus is reported to have said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me," many Christians believe in proclaiming that their truth is the only way to know God (John 14:6). When a well-known athlete publicly thanks Jesus Christ for a victory, or celebrates an athletic performance by pointing to the sky or kneeling in prayer, he or she is proclaiming

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[84] Higgs, 16.
[85] Quoted in Hubbard, 67.
[86] For the purposes of this project the discussion will focus on Christianity. Malcolm X's comments reveal, however, that any religion that seeks to use athletic victory as evidence to its truth is distorting to religion because it discounts other religious truths.

Christianity as the truth. Hoffman argues: " 'I don't know what a person can be praying for in the end zone after a touchdown...Are they thanking the Lord that he helped them make the touchdown? If so, because of the structure of the game, he must also be thanking the Lord for stopping the other team from tackling him."[87]

In athletic competition, there are winners and losers by definition. Let us recall Tillich's quote: "The personal encounter with God and the reunion with him are the heart of all genuine religion."[88] He continues: "The quest for the New Being is universal because the human predicament and its ambiguous conquest are universal. It appears in all religions."[89] Religion is not about winning and losing. If all genuine religions are after a reunion with God, then some people will certainly find a truth that fits more closely with their lived experience than other people's truths. Different people will subscribe to different stories. This ought not discount the other truths. Unfortunately, this is exactly what the promotion of Christianity through successful athletic performance does. Muscular Christianity uses physical achievement to promote Jesus Christ as the one Truth, better than all other claims to the truth.

If God's love is for all of God's creation, and God is capable of extending this love to humanity in multiple ways, then this love is warped by demonstrations that try to prove that Jesus Christ is the only way that God extends God's. For those who are a part of the Christian story, it is truth to claim that Jesus on the cross is the most perfect expression of God's love. As soon as this truth turns into a claim that this is the only valid expression of that love, religion ceases to be about finding expressions of God's

[87] Quoted in Hubbard, 206.
[88] Tillich, 86.
[89] Ibid.

love and grace. It then becomes judgment on which expressions are better than others – which expression is, ultimately, the Truth.

Here, again, American culture's fascination with winning has allowed the competition metaphor to creep into religion. Our culture, especially our competitive sports culture, looks for winners and losers. When sports and athletes proclaim the Christian message through successful performance, the competitive framework makes for an easy adaptation of religion. A victory by a Christian over a Jew or a Muslim does not serve as evidence that Christianity is a truer path to God than Judaism or Islam. Competitive athletics in American culture would have us believe otherwise. This is a major distortion of the Christian story, and of God's unconditional love for humanity.

Chapter III

A New Set of Rules: A Constructive Proposal for Christianity and Competitive Athletics in American Culture

After an exploration of the how Christianity is adopted, adapted, and misrepresented by competitive athletics in American culture, one conclusion is evident: if we are to continue blending Christianity with athletics in this culture, we must find a more constructive way of doing so – a way that is truer to God's love and Jesus as an expression of it. Before we can begin to propose a model for accomplishing this daunting task, we must first believe that it can be done.

In *Christ and Culture,* H. Richard Niebuhr describes five different methods for approaching "the relations of Christianity and civilization…carried on in our time."[90] Neibuhr's fifth approach, "Christ the Transformer of Culture," presents the most positive view of culture. Culture is valuable to Niebuhr because it is a part of God's creation. Because of their imperfection, humans often make a mess out of that culture, as in the case of our sports world. Because Christ is always presently active in human history, however, there is the possibility of renewal of culture through Christ. "This is what human culture can be – a transformed human life in and to the glory of God. For man it is impossible, but all things are possible to God, who has created man, body and soul, for

[90] H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, 1951), 1.

Himself, and sent his Son into the world that the world through him might be saved."[91] Through Christ the transformer of culture, American culture can weave together competitive athletics and Christianity in a way that is more true to God's love.

Aside from believing that a better way can be realized, we must also discern whether it is athletics or Christianity that ought to be adjusted. Aitken argues that athletics are not significantly impacted by the influence of evangelical Christianity. He writes: "No born-again athlete has refused to play as Bobby Hull did some years ago to protest against the violence in sport. 'Born-Again Sports' organizations tend to reaffirm the existing characteristics of sport...My contention is that "Born-Again Sport" has had little effect on sport except to support the status quo. Its effect on religion, however, has been far greater."[92]

Christianity's presence in competitive athletics has yet to remove or diminish the focus on and celebration of winning. It has not influenced athletes to donate significant percentages of their salaries to care for the poor, and it has not reduced the unnecessary violence often seen in sports. Off the field problems among athletes, such as substance abuse and sexual misconduct, have not changed because of Christianity. Christianity has a presence in competitive athletics because it is an easy way for Christianity to be sold and promoted, and because it helps athletes excel. If Christianity showed no signs of enhancing the performance and winning results of athletes, it would not have such a strong connection with American competitive athletics.

What has changed, as discussed in Chapter Two, is Christianity. It has been molded to fit the theology of winning in American competitive sports to the extent that

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[91] Ibid., 196.
[92] Aitken in Prebish, 207-208.

Christianity is being compromised. God's unconditional love for creation and Jesus as an expression of this love are distorted by the sports world. In order to remedy this problem, competitive athletics must undergo change. If they are altered in order to better represent the essence of Christianity, sports will no longer compromise Christianity. I also believe competitive athletics will improve as an institution in American culture through such a change. Hoffman believes in the possibility of this change:

> There is, of course, a way out for the evangelicals, a way they can more closely align their athletic rituals to the sentiment and beliefs they wish to express, a way to cancel inherent contradictions between faith and action...a way to insure that the seeds of the movement will lead to a reconceptualization of the meaning of sport in the Christian life. This would quite obviously require them to build a new sports ethic from the ground up, an ethic that places a premium on the Christian distinctives of submitting ends to means, product to process, quantity to quality, caring for self to caring for others. An ethic, I'm afraid, that would never lead to the Super Bowl...That sports can and should be played as expressions of Christian sentiment is a radical notion, one I find both logical and practical, but only as ritual allows itself to be shaped by the religious beliefs that give rise to it. It is a notion the sports establishment, with its appetite for production and commercial gain, has every reason to fear, because to approach sport as a medium for expressing Christianity is, like the Christian message itself, an invitation to renewal.[93]

I extend Hoffman's radical notion that sports can be played as an expression of Christianity one step further. Sports can express God's unconditional love and Jesus as an expression of this love. That sports could express this love is certainly a radical concept, and Hoffman is right on in pointing out the similarity with the Christian message. The idea of renewal takes us back to Niebuhr. Through Jesus Christ active in history, we have an invitation to renewal. Sports can express Christianity, but first, as Hoffman articulates, it must take on a renewed identity.

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[93] Hoffman, "Evangelicalism and Religious Ritual," 122-123.

Changing Strategy – Components of a Better Way

"Winning Isn't Everything...It Just Isn't" – Toward a Celebration of the Journey

In order for God's unconditional love to shine through competitive athletics, the theology of winning must be abandoned. Winning must be removed as the ultimate goal of competitive athletics. Certainly winning will remain a goal of competitive athletics. There is simply no way to avoid this. Every competitive athlete would rather or win than lose. This emphasizes the fact that winning and losing are ultimately outside of the control of the athlete. This is not to say that it lies in the hands of the divine. The opposite is true. An athlete can do everything perfectly, including preparation, performance, effort, and attitude, and still emerge from a competition without victory. Simply put, if athletes could choose to win each time they compete, then why do they all lose at some point? Are they not choosing to win? Are they instead choosing to lose? It seems obvious that every competitive athlete would choose winning over losing if it were possible to do so.

Perhaps an example will help illustrate this point. I am a competitive athlete, a tennis player for one of the nation's elite NCAA Division III men's tennis programs. I play to win each time that I step on the tennis court. If I could choose to win all of my matches, I would. Let us say, for the sake of argument, we played a team who had a player named Pete Sampras. This is the same Pete Sampras who has won thirteen grand-slam singles titles, and who is considered by most who understand the game of tennis to be the greatest champion in the history of the sport. When the lineups are announced, I am slated to take on Mr. Sampras. I will do everything that I am capable of doing, within the rules, in order to win the tennis match. The fact is, I will never beat Pete Sampras. I

can make the choice to win, but I will not win. Winning in this situation, as it is in any competitive situation, is outside the control of the athlete. The opponent cannot be controlled. Nor can the setting, conditions, or even the small bounces that can be the difference between winning and losing. The goal of competition remains victory. But because it is a result-oriented goal, it lies outside the control of the competitor.

Even though many realize that they cannot win each time they compete, the inability to achieve result-orientated goals often leaves competitive athletes with a great deal of anxiety. Aitken writes:

> Unfortunately, not everyone can be a winner. Even perennial winners suffer an occasional defeat. Muhammad Ali has blown a fight or two...the Montreal Canadians do manage to lose at least a handful of games each season. The tragedy of the modern athlete is that he is not prepared to accept and live with defeat. Defeat or failure evokes feelings of frustration, doubt, anxiety and self-contempt, and these feelings in turn only tend to further aggravate the basic drive toward self-glorification.[94]

The goal of winning will always exist because of the nature of competition. The emphasis placed upon this goal, however, can change. The grand celebration of winning can also be changed. Our culture needs to begin to celebrate the beauty of athletic competition. When the focus shifts to means, process, quality, and caring for others, as Hoffman suggests, competition will be renewed to reveal God's love. When determining who wins and who loses fades as the primary goal of competition, a love for the struggle, an appreciation of skill, hard work, teamwork, perseverance, positive attitude, and a care for others will begin to emerge. Competing with full effort and a concern for the opponent as well as with a positive, never-quit attitude are all within the competitor's control. If these become the goals of the competitor, God's love for creation is better represented. There is no longer a grand celebration of one athlete or team over another.

[94] Aitken in Hoffman, 240-241.

God's love is not based on the condition of winning and losing. God loves each competitor with an unfailing love. Our culture ought to begin to celebrate athletes giving full effort and treating opponents with the highest level of respect. Stories of athletes who persevere through adversity in order to be able to compete, not to win, ought to be celebrated. Assuredly there will always be winners and losers, but God's love is not represented by results. It is more clearly realized in process, in what one learns about one's self, one's teammates, one's opponents, and one's God on the journey toward the result. Arthur Ashe, one of the great sportsmen of the 20th century, exemplified this perspective. "Success is a journey, not a destination. The doing is often more important than the outcome."[95] A grand celebration of this journey is a characteristic of a better way. It is a model of success based on acceptance, and it reflects God's love in a clear way.

Jesus the Edge-Giver vs. Jesus the Mediator

Once we focus on the journey and on God's love, there is much less reason for athletes to use Jesus Christ to help them gain the edge. Pregame prayer would shift from prayers for victory and high-level performance, to prayers that ask God to reveal God to competitors through the process of practice and competition. Recalling Tillich's characterization of the work of Jesus Christ, Jesus is the Mediator of God's grace to humans who are all fundamentally estranged. Through Jesus, humans are reconciled from this estrangement from God. With a decreased emphasis on winning, this aspect of Jesus' identity can shine through the sports world. Athletes would no longer need to use

[95] CMG Worldwide, "Quotes by Ashe," 2002, http://www.cmgww.com/sports/ashe/quotes.html (6 May 2002).

Jesus as a performance-enhancing tool. The message of evangelical organizations such as FCA and AIA would be that Jesus reconciles us to God irrespective of our athletic successes. Losers would be selected to stand up and share their faith stories just as often as winners.

Imagine a sports world in which an athlete who has just made a mistake that caused his team to lose the Super Bowl or the World Series began his post-game interview by thanking Jesus Christ and giving the glory to God. Imagine the "loser's circle" emerging as place from which God's name is proclaimed. The love of God is not better expressed by winners than it is by losers. If success were measured in terms of the journey instead of wins and losses, then all athletes who live in the Christian story would thank God and Jesus in the aftermath of the big game.

If winning decreased in importance, Jesus as an expression of God's love would be the Jesus who gets promoted through athletics. The Jesus who takes sides in competition would fade. Athletes would begin to realize that God's love is for all of God's creation, and that Jesus the edge-giver simply does not exist. To be blunt, I cannot believe in a mediator of God's grace who takes sides in an athletic competition. Having Christ in one's life does not increase one's odds for victory, because "religion or good have nothing to do with athletic excellence."[96] Christ would not need to increase one's chances for success if it were defined in terms of acceptance. All are accepted by God, just as they are. The competitive edge comes from hard work, preparation, confidence in one's self and one's teammates, having faced adverse situations with courage, and many other things of the kind. It does not, however, come from Jesus Christ. To claim that it does is compromising to God's love and Jesus as an expression of it.

[96] Higgs, 14.

Jesus the Loser

Another distortion of Christianity occurs when Jesus is portrayed as an outstanding athlete who would be the champion of winners. The importance of Jesus' concern for the neighbor and the poor is omitted from the identity of Jesus the winner. This concern can be represented in competitive athletics if (once again) winning decreases in importance. A key way to decrease the importance of winning is to place a strong emphasis on sportsmanship. Treating the opponent with respect is well within the control of an athlete. Whether an athlete is winning, losing, playing well, or playing poorly, he or she can always treat the opposing player(s) as he or she would want to be treated. Competitive athletics currently has no room for this attitude because it does not serve the purpose of winning. With winning as a secondary goal and sportsmanship as a primary goal, the Christian call to love the neighbor can become a part of competitive athletics. Concern for the other can be injected into American culture with competitive athletics as a leading model.

The second way in which the patterning of the competitor after Jesus the winner compromises Christianity is the lack of recognition of Jesus as a loser. As discussed in Chapter Two, we have no evidence of Jesus as a successful athlete. We do know, however, that Jesus was a loser by the standards of his time, and that he died the most loser-like death possible – on a cross, between two criminals, outside the walls of the city. This is the last place anyone would have looked in order to find God. Abandoning the theology of winning will make competitive athletics much more comfortable with seeing Jesus as a loser.

Again, sports needs to change. Once this is done, and Jesus is accepted as a loser, the realization that Jesus expresses God's love and reconciles the estrangement of God's people because of his loser status become powerful concepts. All humans are losers to the extent that we are estranged from God. Jesus identifies with us as human beings by being a loser. He is able to show us the face of God because of this status. Jesus as an ultimate expression of God's love is possible through Jesus the loser. The essence of Christianity is better represented by Jesus the loser who is much more real than Jesus the winner, an identity developed to fit the theology of winning.

Salvation Without a Win/Loss Column

The evangelical concept of salvation that dominates competitive athletics does so because of the premium the sports world places upon winning. Winning represents converting souls and going to heaven. Losing, of course, is equated with hell. The winning metaphor makes this definition of salvation easily adaptable to sports. What does salvation look like when sports are renewed and the value of winning decreases and that of sportsmanship increases? First, it will lose its exclusivity. I cannot pretend to know who God redeems or how God redeems them. I do not believe, however, that a God that loves its creation unconditionally only redeems the relatively small number of human beings who have heard of Jesus Christ and who willingly choose to accept him as their personal lord and savior. If winning lessens in importance, then the exclusivity that accompanies it will disappear from the concept of salvation that dominates the world of sports.

The need to view ourselves as "saved," and with a mission to convert the "unsaved" vanishes when salvation is not viewed in terms of winning and losing. Success based on acceptance, on "playing the game" or the "opportunity to compete" would breed a concept of salvation that includes all of God's creation. Tillich writes: "In some degree all men participate in the healing power of the New Being. Otherwise, they would have no being. The self-destructive consequences of estrangement would have destroyed them. But no men are totally healed, not even those who have encountered healing power as it appears in Jesus as the Christ."[97] This much more inclusive concept of salvation removes the separation of saved and unsaved – winners and losers. Without the heavy emphasis on winning, the winning metaphor for salvation packs less punch. A concept of salvation that more closely represents God's love then becomes more likely to be accepted.

If sports changes its focus from winning to sportsmanship, the evangelical, otherworldly concept of salvation that dominates sports culture will be replaced by a concept of salvation that focuses on life in this world. Currently, this "here and now" notion is left out of competitive athletics in American culture. Concern for the other is a characteristic of salvation that includes a life of following Jesus on earth. Let us recall Bravo's description of salvation. Jesus Christ saves us by giving us a "new capacity, a Spirit to enable us to live as children of the Father, as brothers and sisters of our fellow human beings."[98] The idea that we live our lives with care for our fellow humans because we are reunited with God makes salvation very much about the here and now.

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[97] Tillich, 167.
[98] Bravo, 122.

Competitive athletics in American culture can embrace and model this breed of salvation by promoting concern for the other, and by placing a greater value on the journey than on the result. Acting like Jesus and promoting his cause of caring for others, especially those less fortunate than ourselves, will take precedence over the result of going to heaven. Athletics can promote a focus on the here and now by valuing the journey of sport over the result of winning. What we learn, the relationships we develop, and the way we treat our opponents along the way are more important than the outcome of a competition.

Ultimately, eternal life is outside of the control of human beings. If it exists at all, it is in the hands of God. Again, we see the strong similarity with winning. Although it does not rest in God's hands, it, like eternal life is outside of the athlete's control. Rather than focus on that which is outside of our control, why not focus on that which is? Living with a new capacity as children of the Father and as brothers and sisters of one another is something that we can do. It is a salvation that represents God's love for God's creation. It is also a salvation that competitive athletics in American culture can help develop and promote by emphasizing the importance of the journey, and the concern for one's neighbor. Again, however, this is dependent upon a portion of American culture – competitive athletics – being transformed.

Competitive Athletics Without Competitive Religion

Major and professional athletics will always be competitive. A shift in focus from winning to the journey and sportsmanship will not eliminate winning and losing from sports. In competition, there will always be winners and losers. This does not make

sports a hopeless medium for revealing God's love and Jesus as an ultimate expression of it in American culture. The final way in which this expression can be made through a reduction of the importance of winning is promoting a Christianity that is not competitive. This type of Christianity can exist in competitive sports. It starts with the elimination of muscular Christianity. If God loves God's creation without condition, and Jesus is an ultimate expression of this love, then the use of winning and successful athletic performance as evidence that Christianity is the Truth, is simply invalid. God is capable of extending God's love in infinite ways. Recalling Tillich once again, we remember that reunion with God is at the heart of all genuine religion. The longing for this encounter is a part of the human condition because of estrangement.[99]

When winning is removed as the primary concern of competitive athletics, the need to prove that Christianity is the only valid religious truth will diminish. As discussed in Chapter Two, there are different stories through which God acts. The claim that only Christians have religious truth misrepresents God's love. The current state of competitive athletics, driven by the theology of winning, promotes this claim. There are "haves" and "have-nots" in athletics, and Christianity is molded to fit this scenario. Christians become the "haves," and everyone else becomes the "have-nots." Winning is a way to validate this expression for all to see on the field of play. When the journey and the concern for the other replace winning, there will be no need to glorify or promote Christ through touchdowns, goals, home-runs, and championship podiums. There will be no use of winning to express that one religion is better or more truthful than any other. Sports will become a way to demonstrate that God's love is for all God's creation. God's

[99] Tillich, 86.

love is for winners and losers. And it is for Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and all of God's other creations as well as for Christians.

Christianity is about God's love and Jesus as an ultimate expression of it. It is not about being right or proving someone else is wrong. This can shine through a sports world that cherishes the journey over victory. If winning is of lesser importance than process and sportsmanship, then it will decrease as a way of expressing the supremacy of Christianity. In the same way that sports ought not be about winning and losing – essentially proving that on team or athlete is better than another, religion ought not be about proving that one faith or religious truth is better or more true than another. Sportsmanship and the journey are vehicles that can relate the Christian story. Because of their inclusive nature, however, they are far more likely to promote God's love and Jesus as an expression of that love than they are to promote the triumphal component of Christianity – a component that distorts the Christian message of love.

Athletics Based on God's Unconditional Love – The Tennis and Life Camps Model

Changing competitive athletics in American culture by reducing the emphasis on winning and placing it on the journey and sportsmanship will not be what sells. It will be more of a true representation of God's love and Jesus as an ultimate expression of God's love – the essence of Christianity. Sports can become a piece of American culture that shows God's love to our society. Believing that this is possible - that Christ can transform culture as described by Niebuhr - is the first step in making it happen. The current state of competitive sports make this transformation seem difficult. Perhaps an example of it will provide further hope that it can be accomplished.

In 1977 Steve and Barb Wilkinson created Tennis and Life Camps. Steve Wilkinson had been a professor of religion and the varsity tennis coach at Gustavus Adolphus College for seven years before deciding to begin TLC. He had always dreamed of a way to combine values with education and to serve his calling to share the love of God with his brothers and sisters.

One of his students, Karen Gibbs, was the number one player on the Gustavus women's tennis team. Gibbs was a tremendously successful player, but experienced pain in her right elbow during her sophomore season. The problem was originally diagnosed as tennis elbow, but was eventually found to be cancer. Gibbs underwent treatment, but the disease progressed. Doctors were forced to amputate her right arm. When Wilkinson, her teacher and friend, went to Rochester, Minnesota to visit her in the hospital he expected to find a dejected young woman. To his surprise, Gibbs greeted him with a smile and declared that she would learn to play tennis left-handed and intended to join her team as a playing member during her junior season. Gibbs accomplished her goal when most would have never attempted to re-learn the game without the use of their dominant arm. She was in the line-up at number three doubles when Gustavus competed against its toughest opponent, the University of Minnesota.

Later that season, treatment and the spreading disease weakened Gibbs to the point that she suffered separations in her left shoulder. She was no longer able to play tennis. She continued to lead her teammates in conditioning drills, and she approached Wilkinson, the men's coach, for increased ways to push the team's new number one player, when she had never done so for herself. Gibbs' teammates elected her captain for her senior season. She died the following summer.

It took an incredible amount of courage for Karen Gibbs to learn to play tennis left-handed, with only one arm. She learned more and positively influenced the lives of more people through her journey than she did with any of her many victories on the tennis court. Even more special was the lesson that she taught Wilkinson (and through him continues to teach thousands of people each year) about sportsmanship. She told Wilkinson that she refused to make excuses when she lost or played poorly because doing so communicated to others and to her opponent that her opposition was winning only because of Gibbs' poor play. Making excuses for not winning only took away from her opponents' accomplishments. Wilkinson had never thought of sportsmanship in such a way. He decided to adopt this philosophy in his competitive tennis career.

In addition to her incredible determination and her exemplary sportsmanship, Karen Gibbs displayed a positive attitude at all times, both on and off of the tennis court. Throughout her battle with cancer she repeatedly expressed how fortunate she was to have the life that she had. She had wonderful friends and family. She wrote in one of her journal entries for Wilkinson's course in world religions: "LOOK AT MY ABUNDANCE." It was this choice to maintain a positive attitude, combined with her sportsmanship and determination that became a major motivation for Steve and Barb Wilkinson to create TLC.

The TLC experience has been a part of my life for close to eight years. I began attending TLC as a junior tennis player at the age of 15. After four summers as a camper, I have spent three summers on the TLC staff and will begin my fourth this June. TLC has changed my life in a number of ways, as a competitive athlete, as a teacher and coach, as a student, and as a human being. Tennis has become a great source of joy in the

lives of many people over the past quarter-century because of TLC. I am fortunate to be one of them. People come to TLC and experience a love and acceptance by the TLC staff that allows them to let down their guard, experience great joy, and take the necessary chances to learn about tennis, life, and themselves. Being a part of this experience from both the camper and staff perspective has provided some of my life's most beautiful experiences.

Since 1977 TLC has been reaching thousands of campers each summer with a different message about sports. Campers receive expert instruction on strokes and strategies and improve immensely as tennis players during their time at TLC. What is more important than the development of their games, however, is the exposure to a different perspective on winning and competition than that provided by our culture. Sportsmanship, full effort, positive attitude, and enjoyment of play and competition – all elements within an athlete's control - are the cornerstones of the TLC philosophy of competition. Campers are taught to always compliment their opponents on good shots, and to never make excuses for their poor play. The line calls of the opponent are not to be challenged, and following matches campers are encouraged to compliment their opponents on the things they have done well, irrespective of the outcome. Sportsmanship is at the heart of the TLC message because it reflects a concern for the other and drastically reduces the emphasis on winning and other result-oriented goals.

By moving winning to the background, TLC handles the five problems discussed in Chapter Two in its own unique way. Let us save the discussion of the lack of the grand celebration of winning for last, and begin with the use of Jesus to gain the edge. First off, it must be pointed out that TLC is not a camp exclusively for Christians. It is

open to people of any faith, or of no faith at all. Neither Jesus Christ, nor any other religious figure is promoted as a performance enhancer at TLC. Instead, during the final program of each camp, Steve Wilkinson shares the serenity prayer with the campers as something that he use each day of his life. The prayer reads: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." It is given as an approach to tennis and any other situation that one might encounter in life. It does not ask for victory, and it does not expect victory. In fact, along with the prayer, Wilkinson points out that winning falls under the category of things outside one's control. The edge comes from a positive attitude, hard work, full effort, and determination. It does not guarantee victory, but it does guarantee a journey filled with learning experiences and much joy.

Because it removes winning from the foreground of competition, TLC does not focus on Jesus Christ as a model of the winning competitor. The camp does not shed much light on Jesus as a loser, because it does not promote Christianity. It does, however, highlight Jesus' concern for the neighbor through its commitment to sportsmanship. Salvation is an issue that is not touched on directly at TLC, but the camp indirectly promotes a non-exclusive version salvation by treating everyone as brother and sisters – children of God. Competitive religion is not discussed in any of TLC presentations or lessons. But again, the atmosphere of acceptance and equal treatment of each TLC camper indirectly communicates that there are many truths and more than one way that God is capable of extending relief from estrangement to human beings.

Finally, by focusing on the journey and sportsmanship instead of participating in the grand celebration of winning, TLC provides an experience that is representative of

God's unconditional love for God's creation. At TLC the most skilled camper is loved just the same as the person who is picking up a tennis racket for the first time. The losers of our tournaments are praised just as much as the winners. Every camper is loved for who they are, and thus the atmosphere of equality and acceptance is created and fostered during each day of TLC. TLC is different from other camps, and from other communities in our culture because people do not have to do or be anything in order to be loved and accepted.

The goal that lies at the heart of Tennis and Life is that every person who comes through our doors is loved, accepted, and praised for being who they are. We do not try to convert or save anyone. We simply try to love them in a way that replicates the love of God. We are well aware of our humanity and that loving exactly as God does is not possible. We do our best, however, to present an experience that shows our campers and our staff what God's love looks and feels like. Many people have never had such an experience. TLC is more than a camp. It is a mission. But it is a different kind of mission. We change lives by helping people experience God's love just as they are, because we believe that they are deserving of it. We do not tell anyone that this is what we are doing. We simply do it. We love because we are loved by God. In the process we allow God's love to shine through competitive athletics. It is the medium through which we are able to communicate this love. It is a different way of injecting pieces of the Christian story into sports. It works. I have felt its tremendous impact as a camper and as a teacher. It is a different way that starts with transforming athletics.

Conclusion – One Final Play

This little tennis camp that runs for two and half months in St. Peter, Minnesota each summer provides hope. It provides hope that God's love can be revealed through American culture, specifically competitive athletics. This revelation is, as mentioned many times, contingent upon decreasing the emphasis on winning. This represents a fundamental change for our athletics, a change that will not be welcomed by the big business of American competitive athletics because winning sells and makes a lot more money than sportsmanship or the journey. This change is radical, but we can still believe in it. The Christian message that God loves us unconditionally and that Jesus Christ came to earth, lived, died and was raised so that we might be reconciled from our estrangement from God is also radical. Our most perfect expression of God's love on this earth is of a loser hanging on a cross outside the city walls, dying a humiliating death between two criminals. In fact, this seems to be even more radical than transforming the driving force behind the games that we play. Even more in our favor is that we are not alone in bringing about this transformation. The Jesus Christ that is a part of our story is active throughout history. He is the transformer of culture – including athletics. We can look to him to aid our cause, and in turn, we can begin promoting his in a renewed way.

The Christian story is a radical story of renewal. The renewal of competitive athletics is no different. It will bring about a symbiotic relationship between Christianity and competitive athletics that is based on God's love, and that has a positive impact on both parties involved. When I began this project I was asked whether I was trying to rescue sports or Christianity. My response, after some careful thought, was "both." The two go hand in hand. By making the suggested major change to competitive athletics, the Christianity that shines through it is much more representative of the Christian story. A Christianity that is un-compromised by the vehicle that presents it is difficult to find anywhere, in any culture. I do not believe anyone or any institution gets Christianity right all the time. We cannot, however, afford to miss the essential parts.

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