



Watson, Nick J. and Kumar, Simon ORCID logoORCID:
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Sport, Theology and the Special Olympics: A Christian Theological Reflection

Nick J. Watson, York St John University, UK

Simon Kumar, York St John University, UK

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Abstract

This article explores the potential of the Special Olympic movement to act as a counter-narrative and prophetic message to the big-business world of professional sports. Drawing on the work of pioneers in the field of theology of disability, such as, Jean Vanier, John Swinton, Brian Brock, Amos Yong and Stanley Hauerwas, we provide a brief overview of the key themes within the theology of disability which are then deployed analyse the Special Olympics. This section is prefaced with a succinct account of the modern sporting institution and its key characteristics from a theological stand-point. We conclude that “those that are excluded ... those at the edge of the system” (Rohr, 1995, p. 28)—Special Olympians—have an important and timely message for those within the system of big-business professional sport.

KEYWORDS: Special Olympics, theology of disability, counter-narrative, prophetic message

Introduction

In our world, we treat everyone well and tell everyone that they can be a winner. There are no losers in our world. That’s the world I love. I say God is my strength and Special Olympics is my Joy. I count on them both in my world. So come into my world ... everyone has a chance to belong.

Loretta Clairborne, Special Olympics Competitor and Board Member, and
winner of the Arthur Ashe ESPY Courage Award (cited in Shriver, 2015, pp.
153-154)

It is extremely doubtful if most sport fans have heard of Loretta Clairborne (or even the Special Olympics). Perhaps, you have not heard of Loretta Clairborne—we will say more about why this may be the case within our essay. Loretta has met a number of US Presidents, she has delivered keynote lectures alongside the CEO of the Special Olympics, Timothy Shriver, there is a Disney film that documents her biography, *The Loretta Clairborne Story* (2000), and, she has recorded a TED

talk.¹ Loretta is an exceptional athlete, a Christian believer, a disability advocate, a motivational speaker and in her role as Special Olympian, her life in many ways personifies the central thesis of our essay. Before further exploration of athletes such as Loretta and the sport movement in which they play and compete, the Special Olympics, we provide a brief ‘position statement’ with regard to theological reflection and praxis on disability sport.

Reflection on disability sport to date has primarily focussed on issues surrounding embodiment, competitive classification, social-exclusion, biomechanical study of prostheses, governance and media and cinematic representations of athletes with disabilities (Thomas & Smith, 2008). Theological analysis of disability sport has been virtually non-existent to-date. However, this journal Special Edition, recent publications (Brock, 2012; Watson & Parker, 2015; Watson, 2013; Watson & Parker, 2012) and two keynote lectures by one of the pioneers of the field of theology of disability, John Swinton (2016, 2012), demonstrates a growing interest in this subject matter. This corpus of work that is focussed on the theology of disability is largely based upon the foundational writings of theologians, such as, John Swinton, Brian Brock, Amos Yong, John Hull, Henri Nouwen, Stanley Hauerwas and the founder of *L’Arche*², Jean Vanier. These writers, ministers and practitioners have provided a much-needed discourse on the theology of disability that critiques and informs ecclesiological practice and the work of Christian sport organisations. Building on this work, we provide some provisional thoughts on how Christians may understand disability sport. In particular, we focus on athletes with intellectual disabilities and the Special Olympics, the movement that represents them, whom we contend are an incarnational prophetic message for the big-business world of professional sport. Our first task, however, is to provide a synopsis of theological work on human disability.

¹The website of Loretta Clairborne can be accessed at: <http://www.lorettaclairborne.com/>

²*L’Arche* (French for Ark) is a Catholic, yet wholly ecumenical, international federation of 140 communities in over 40 countries, where people with and without learning difficulties live in community. Its founder is Jean Vanier, a pioneer, celebrated, philosopher, writer and practitioner in this area.

Theology of Disability: Some Key Themes

Following the publication of Nancy Eiesland's now classic book, *The Disabled God* (1994), there has been a gradual increase in academic and autobiographical theological reflection on disability (e.g., Brock & Swinton, 2012; Swinton, 2011). Historically, a major reason for the lack of interest in this area is that the discipline of academic theology has been bound to what Stanley Hauerwas (2004) calls a "tyranny of normality" that has been perpetuated by theologies based on the enlightenment principles of rationality, abelism, utilitarianism and perfectionism. In this world-view those with disabilities are often *unconsciously* excluded, marginalised and perceived as somehow inferior to the able-bodied, who are those in society deemed useful. Historically, the Catholic Church has been at the forefront of challenging this view, in particular through the pontificate of Pope John Paul II, who ministered to Olympic athletes with disabilities (John Paul II, 2000, 1985). The 'Sporting Pontiff'—as he was frequently called—in a Homily to those individuals with disabilities, delivered in St Peter's square, strongly affirms the value of persons with disabilities and their position in the world Church:

This is how the *Christian community prepares for the Lord's second coming*: by focusing on those persons whom Jesus himself favored, those who are often excluded and ignored by society ... By your situation you call into question those conceptions of life that are solely concerned with satisfaction, appearances ... success or well-being ... speed and efficiency [consider modern professional sports] ... "Blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake," for great will be their reward in heaven! This is the paradox of Christian hope: *what seems humanly a ruin, is in the divine plan always a plan of salvation* ... its profound reason in the mystery of the cross (Phil. 2:6–8) ...

bearing witness in the world to human dignity, whose source is not the outward condition of the body but the primordial likeness to the Creator.³

Pope John Paul II, who himself died in weakness as Parkinson's disease ravaged his body, and whom reflected deeply on the sanctity and dignity of the human body/person during his lifetime, brings us back to the foot of the cross when thinking about persons with physical and/or intellectual disabilities. While there is an emergent literature that has examined issues surrounding theological-anthropology/embodiment in disability sport (e.g., Dailey, 2016; Hochstetler, Hopsicker, & Kretchmar, 2008; Parker & Watson, 2017a; Watson & Bolt, 2017), that chimes closely with John Paul's theology; it is his emphasis on the role of humility and vulnerability in appreciating the mystery of human disability in any human endeavour, including sports, which points us towards those with intellectual disabilities (and the movement that represent them), as a potential source of inspiration and potential prophetic insight.

Based on the biblical premise that all human-beings, regardless of physical or intellectual disability, are of equal worth and dignity in the eyes of God—*imago Dei*, an ungodly hierarchy has been well-documented in research (Watson, 2013) on physically (Paralympians) and intellectually (Special Olympians) disabled athletes and is worryingly portrayed in the Paralympic docu-movie, *Murderball* (2005). Due to the scope of this article, we are unable to unpack the many challenging scriptural passages that when read in isolation to the whole biblical narrative, appear to devalue persons with disabilities, and/or intimate a sin-disability conflation (Lev. 21: 18-26; 2 Cor. 12: 7; Lk. 5: 17-26; Jn. 9: 1-3). In summary the key themes that are addressed in the literature are: spiritual and psychological struggles with disablement and transition to disablement; analyses of biblical passages on disability and their relation to gospel narratives of healing; examination of theological anthropology—*imago Dei*, and its importance for accurately assessing the worth/identity, value and dignity of all human beings, regardless of disability or difference; exploration of fundamental gospel

³This quote was taken from: John Paul II, Address of the Holy Father John Paul II, Jubilee of the Disabled, 2000.

values, such as hospitality, friendship, humility, mutuality, vulnerability and weakness; the socio-cultural, political and ecclesiological structures that marginalise and oppress people with disabilities, and most importantly here; how persons with disabilities, in particular intellectual disabilities, can be seen as prophets to the modern age, and in turn, the commercialised sport realm.

The Institution of Sport: Our Context for Analysis

Consultant psychiatrists working in sport have noted that reflection on existential meaning in sport and life and thoughts of weakness, vulnerability and humility are an “anathema” to many modern able-bodied professional athletes (Begel & Burton, 2000). As Watson (2011) has intimated, this view is closely tied to the athlete’s sense of identity:

Fourth in the Olympics hurt, but retirement is like a death in the family ... I struggled for three months ... I’d walk around and just start filling up. I’d wake up lost. I didn’t know what to do. My emotions were so intense I felt I’d lost a member of the family. I’d lost a major part of my life, something was dead. Everything I’d lived for was over.

British Olympic Decathlete, Dean Macey, on retiring from sport (Slot, 2008)

We do not in any way denigrate the quest for excellence in sport or any other human endeavour (e.g., music, dancing, art, parenting, preaching, peeling potatoes etc.), determined performances, disciplined training regimes and the emotional intensity that often characterise modern sports participation and fandom. But there is voluminous evidence that demonstrates that modern commercialised professional sport is plagued with moral and ethical issues (Transparency International, 2016; McNamee, 2008; Watson & Parker, 2014). More often than not, these are rooted in a prideful and idolatrous heart (linked to identity issues), that seeks to ‘win-at-all-costs’, resulting in cheating, verbal and physical violence, alienation in relationships, doping, political boycotts, financial greed and corruption—including exploitation of workers in the development of

infrastructure for porting mega-events, self-exaltation and on the horizon genetic performance enhancement technologies for athletes (Watson & White, 2012). As the boxing icon, Muhammed Ali in 1963 clearly grasped, humility is not desirable if one wants to “get on” in the sporting arena: “at home I am a nice guy: but I don’t want the world to know. Humble people, I’ve found, don’t get very far” (cited in Kluck, 2009, p. 129).

It is then interesting to consider Paul’s paradoxical ministry of “power through weakness” (the self-emptying gospel of Christ), described in 2 Corinthians, and the self-exalting cultural setting of first-century Corinth. Is not this in many ways a mirror-image of the self-promoting, celebrity culture of today and twenty-first century sport? Theologian, Timothy Savage (2004)⁴ addresses this question in his description of first-century Corinth:

It was a time when everyone yearned for an admiring public ... The pursuit of upward mobility thus turned into a quest for applause and esteem ... and self-glorification ... The first century AD was intensely competitive ... It was an era of ... great accomplishment, but also anxiety and uncertainty ... The practice of setting athletes on pedestals sheds penetrating light on what people in the first century valued most ... The games [Isthmian] thus reflected in microcosm, and more intensely, the competitive spirit of the first century ... The actor, runner or rhetorician won adulation in the same way as the merchant banker or tanner – by excelling his rivals ... Indeed the drive to show oneself better than one’s neighbour was perhaps more pronounced in Corinth than anywhere else ... Competition for honour had two important side-effects. First, it encouraged outward expressions of pride and arrogance. For many boasting itself became an activity worthy of honour. Humility on the other hand was scorned. The lowly had no self-respect, no public standing ... individuals grew indifferent to the needs of others.

⁴This quote is constructed from pages 19, 23-24 and 44-45 of chapter 1: *The Social Setting of First-Century Corinth: An Historical Examination* (19-53).

Amos Yong nicely summarises Savage's thesis in stating that "... Paul would be critical of the values that prevail over the contemporary culture of sport. More precisely, when read across the Corinthian letters, Paul's model athlete is less the champion of the Isthmian games than today's Special Olympian" (Yong, 2014, p. 211). The provocative image of a disabled wheelchair athlete on the front cover of Jonathon Lamb's recent commentary of 2 Corinthians, also further illustrates this link (Lamb, 1999). In relation, there is a consistent biblical mandate that also permeates the classical writings of Thomas á Kempis, Oswald Chambers, Francois Fenelon, Andrew Murray and C.S. Lewis, which instructs us 'to humble *ourselves*' (e.g., Phil. 2: 1-11; 1 Pt. 5: 5-6), that is, we must choose to prefer others and not exalt ourselves in the quest for a worldly reputation or riches. Success, status and winning, while neutral concepts in themselves, when corrupted by humans for selfish ends, are values diametrically opposed to the Christian gospel. As Oswald Chambers (1935, September 2) counsels, "our Lord's teaching is always *anti*-self-realization ... his purpose is to make a man exactly like himself". To be sure, according to modern cultural standards of success, Jesus Christ was the greatest failure in human history (while ultimately victorious, Matt. 16: 18), he was 'crucified in weakness' (2 Cor. 13: 4), something that was clearly prophesied by, Isaiah (52: 13-15; 53) in the suffering servant discourse.

Arguing from this standpoint, radical Christian scholars, such as William Stringfellow and Jacques Ellul, and more recently the Old testament theologian, Walter Brueggemann, claim that many of the national, political and institutional structures of western industrialised societies are to some degree driven by the principalities and powers (e.g., Luke 8: 29-33, Gal. 4:3; Eph.1:21; 6:12; Col.1:15-16; 2:15). Conversely, more liberal theological voices have often confused (even supplanted) the meaning and spiritual reality of the 'principalities and powers' with earthly forces/institutions themselves. There is a middle-ground here that John Stott (1980, p. 274) communicates well: if "... we become too negative towards society and its structures ... we find it

hard to believe or say anything good about them, so corrupt they do appear. Advocates of the new theory warn us against deifying structures; I want to warn them against demonizing them. Both are extremes to avoid”. Thus, we strongly champion the *potential* good of sport but also argue the case that the *institution* of professional commercialised sport is one edifice in the modern tower of Babel. Herein lays the prophetic potential of athletes with intellectual disabilities and the movement that represents them, the Special Olympics.

The Special Olympics: A Counter-Narrative and Prophetic Sign

... God chose things the world considers foolish in order to shame those who think they are wise. And he chose things that are powerless to shame those who are powerful. God chose things despised by the world, things counted as nothing at all, and used them to bring to nothing what the world considers important. As a result, no one can ever boast in the presence of God (1 Corinthians. 1:27-29).

If we accept that sporting locales are frequently characterized by values and behaviours that are the antithesis to the Christian gospel, it is then proposed that the weakness, vulnerability, openness and humility that is often demonstrated in Special Olympians (and other types of disability sports) may carry act as a counter-narrative and an incarnational prophetic message to the institution of modern sports. Following other disability theologians, we in no way suggest that those with intellectual disabilities are foolish but that their lives interrogate and critique culturally-bound notions of “normality” and self-worth. In this way, the movement acts as a foil, an intentional offence from God to an institution built largely on human effort and driven by a secular self-exalting spirit. Sporting demi-gods, such as David Beckham and Tiger Woods (until recently), often act as sources of existential meaning and identity for many sports fans—a pseudo-religion (Parker and Watson, 2015). The enduring forces of secularization (1800-) on western modern social history have left a spiritual void that sports now partially occupy. The aesthetic, communal, ritual, mythic,

symbolic, heroic and transcendent features of modern sports provide new liturgies for participants and fans, which substitute those of the Christian tradition (Parker and Watson, 2017b). Consider, for example, the ritual and communal dimensions of the opening and closing ceremonies of the Olympic and Paralympic games. These Games evolved in-part, from the vision of the founder of the modern Olympics, Baron de Coubertin (1836-1937), who regarded the philosophy of Olympism as a “universal humanistic religion” bathed in ritual and ceremony (Watson & Parker, 2013). This is something that theologian, Ashley Null (2008, p. 325), suggests is “... completely antithetical to Christian doctrine” and which has led to many of the ethical quandaries that now permeates the sports realm, not least the idolatrous worship of sporting icons.

This said, it is an extremely positive shift in cultural norms, that a number of high-profile physically disabled athletes (paralympians) such as Oscar Pistorius, Dame Tanni-Grey Thompson, Mark Zupan and Ade Adepitan MBE., have in recent times become celebrities (unfortunately for Pistorius, for reasons beyond his sporting excellence), thus providing positive role models for the disabled community. To our knowledge, however, there are and never have been, any Special Olympians who have attained “celebrity status” in the orbits of western media, not even Loretta Claiborne. This reflects a series of deeply entrenched (and unconscious) societal values that marginalise and devalue those with intellectual disabilities. China’s so-called ‘celebration of the Paralympics’ at the 2008 Beijing Olympiad, perhaps demonstrates a more conscious marginalisation, oppression and devaluing of the disabled (e.g., sex-selective abortion and genetic foetal testing to identify abnormalities with the goal of abortion), which was largely a smoke-screen for their continued emergence on the global stage. Indeed, many Olympics scholars and human-rights organisations (e.g., Amnesty International) seriously questioned the International Olympic Committee’s (IOC) decision to allow China to host the 2008 games, noting that the “moral authority” of the IOC as a force for “global peace” (one aspect of the philosophy of Olympism) was consequently diminished (Close, Askew & Xin, 2007; Hong, 2006; Human Rights Watch, 2008).

Here is an example of where “strength and power” (in making the decision in defence of human rights), rather than “weakness and vulnerability”, would arguably have been the Christ-like response from the IOC. Returning to the notion that the Special Olympic movement has an incarnational prophetic message for the big-business world of sport, we argue, building on the framework of Wolf Wolensberger (2001), the following ways in which it fulfils this mandate.

People with Intellectual Disabilities are much more public and visible and are Internationally Recognised, which is reflected in the sports community, with the Special Olympics (1968-) being the world’s largest organisation for persons with intellectual disabilities: The Special Olympics serves 4 million athletes (children from 8 years and adults) and their families in 185 countries and has 805,000 volunteers, 244,000 coaches, 500,000 officials and organises 44,136 international and regional competitions around the globe each year (Shriver, 2015, 2014). The 6,500 athletes that attended the summer 2015 Special Olympics in Los Angeles, in terms of numbers, far surpasses the 4,342 Paralympic athletes that competed at Rio 2016. This has led the CEO of the Special Olympics, Timothy Shriver, to call the organisation a “civil rights movement of the heart – powered by sport”⁵.

Non-Disabled and Disabled Persons are sharing their lives, often living together. This is personified in *L’Arche* communities where those with disabilities (especially intellectual disabilities) and “assistants”, live together in a “spirit of mutuality”, learning from one another. Jean Vanier, the founder of what many see as a prophetic movement, agrees in principle with Wolfensberger that persons with disabilities carry a prophetic message. Disability sport organisations and events, for example, the Special Olympics and Paralympics that have spawned thousands of regional and local events worldwide, to some degree offer this community spirit through relationships and social support. This is supported by the results of studies that have examined the motivations for athletes

⁵Timothy Shriver, Opening Address of Timothy Shriver (CEO). *Special Olympics Global Congress*, June 7 (2010), Marrakech, Morocco: <http://www.specialolympics.org/slideshow-global-congress-photos.aspx>

participation in the Special Olympics, in which they found that “... athletes identified friendships in the program as the key reason they enjoyed Special Olympics ... the importance placed on relatedness by these participants was striking” (Farrell et al. 2004, p. 160, 164).

Disabled People are Gentling Others, through their vulnerability, weakness and presence. This, we argue, is Wolfenberger’s most pertinent point for the sports world. It is suggested that those with intellectual disabilities have a “gentling” influence on others, making them more compassionate, patient and tender in relationships; a humanizing influence on others, through which we *meet* with the vulnerability and brokenness of others. Similarly, Timothy Shriver (2014) in recounting one of many stories from the Special Olympics, in which an athlete with intellectual disabilities has changed the way people think, suggests that it is “soul power” that gentles others and leads them to consider spiritual and relational issues. Ideally this would always be the case. However, it is also important to acknowledge that persons with intellectual disabilities can be violent, stubborn and very challenging in their behaviour, something that any parent of a disabled child or carer will testify to. The hardening of the heart, rather than gentling, is then always a potential outcome for those who are in regular contact with individuals with intellectual disabilities.

In wider sporting circles, the story of Gene Stallings, a highly competitive professional American football coach at the University of Alabama who has a son with Down syndrome, provides a good example (Stallings & Cook, 1997). Gene was delighted when his wife became pregnant with a son. In addition to his three daughters, he had longed for a son who would be made “in the image” of the big, strong, aggressive players he coached on a daily basis—the masculine American Superman—an idea, that is deeply entrenched in popular culture (Koosed and Schumm, 2009). To Gene’s initial disappointment, when Johnny was born, he was found to have Down syndrome and a serious heart defect. In Gene’s own words, “... for the first time in my life, I was totally helpless” (p. 18). Jonny was certainly never going to be a line-backer. Family members’ and a number of doctors, suggested that Johnny should be institutionalised, because it would be “... easier on the family”, and

one friend even proposed that the presence of Johnny in the family would hinder Gene's "... chances of being a successful coach" (p. 22). However, through his relationship with his son, Stallings quickly realised that he "... was becoming more tolerant, more compassionate, and it was carrying over into work ... I found myself listening a little longer, wanting to help" (Stallings & Cook, 1997, p. 66). These heartfelt reflections are supported by research that has explored *The Positive Contributions of the Special Olympics on the Family* which indicated increased patience, benevolence, tolerance, appreciation of health and family, improved relationships/friendships and a "re-examination of personal values" as the result of consistent interaction with a family member with intellectual disabilities (Kersh & Siperstein, 2010, p. 4). And, ultimately, seeing past the disability to the person.

The first author also has experienced something of this through coaching disability sport and spending time in a *L'Arche* community (Watson & Parker, 2012). People with intellectual disabilities often see beyond our masks and defences, in that they seem to have what some disability theologians have called a "spiritual antennae" that is not determined by intellectual capacity (1 Cor. 1: 18-31). In their vulnerability and transparency they relationally touch recesses of our hearts that we may not normally reveal, for fear of appearing weak or incompetent in front of others that is often due to defensive pride and/or fear of difference. The spiritual giant, Oswald Chambers, experienced something of this, when he was on the brink of psychic collapse and in a spiritual desert during his inward journey of abandonment to God. During a Christian meeting that he was leading, a girl with intellectual disabilities, known as "daft Meg", approached Oswald and placed a bunch of withered flowers on a table next to him. Tied to the flowers was a piece of paper that, said, "With love from daft Meg". Oswald described this as a "... tender touch from the Father conveying His presence and love" (McCasland, 1998, p. 84). It is then interesting to note, that in the tradition of the Special Olympics, each athlete is not only given a medal but also "a hug" after competing, something that

unfortunately in modern society may be questioned because it could encourage inappropriate social behaviour with strangers.

Concluding Remarks

... those at the edge of the system and those excluded from any system [such as professional big-business sports] ... ironically and invariably hold the secret for the conversion and wholeness of that very group.

(Richard Rohr 1995, p. 28)

Timothy Shriver the CEO of the Special Olympics (and a practising catholic), recently commented that Special Olympians “... taught me that we are all totally vulnerable and totally valuable at the same time” and to live with “... my heart cracked open” (Shriver, 2015, p. 234). To live with those individuals on the “edge of the system”, those that are “excluded”, is then to move toward a Christian theology and praxis of sport. Shriver’s words should make us pause and reflect on the fact that the Christian message is not fundamentally one of success, winning and competition—while striving for success and excellence is in no way opposed to Christian doctrine, if done with the correct motivation of heart. Conversely, the Christian story is characterised by a “theology of vulnerability” and an ethos of “downward mobility” (Comensoli, 2011), which arguably is seldom witnessed in the professional sports world. In Jesus words, “the first shall be last, and the last shall be first” (Matt. 19: 30). The protestant theologian, Jürgen Moltmann (1998, p. 121), recognised this in stating that “a person with disabilities gives others the precious insight into the woundedness and weakness of human life”. Perhaps then the Special Olympics are a much-needed counter-narrative and at the same time have a prophetic message for the world of sport and a Church which at times can be too closely linked to the celebrity culture of the age, rather than those broken in mind, body and heart—the marginalised, addicted, homeless and lost. We give the last word to Jean Vanier, a true fan of the Special Olympics:

There is a beautiful story of a young man with a disability who wanted to win the Special Olympics; he got to the hundred meter race and was running like crazy to get the gold medal. One of the others running with him slipped and fell; he turned round and picked him up and they ran across the finishing line together last. Are we prepared to sacrifice the prize for solidarity? It's a big question. Do we want to be in solidarity with others? ... We have to look at the poorest and the weakest. They have a message to give us.

Jean Vanier (cited in Whitney-Brown, 2008, pp. 167-168)

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