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Pre-proof copy.

Email, Nick J. Watson: [n.watson@yorksj.ac.uk](mailto:n.watson@yorksj.ac.uk)

# **‘Winning at all Costs’ in Modern Sport: Reflections on Pride and Humility in the Writings of C.S. Lewis**

**Nick J. Watson and John White**

## **INTRODUCTION**

The late Pope John Paul II fully understood the cultural significance of sport calling it a ‘paradigm of mass psychology’ (Paul 1986: 80). In one of many addresses to Olympic Committees, he championed the role of sport as a vehicle that ‘contributes constructively to the harmonious and complete development of man, body and soul’ (Paul 1979: 60). The Vatican has also recently identified the need to provide theological reflection on sport, which is arguably the most pervasive cultural phenomenon at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, and thus has established an office for ‘Church and Sport’ within the pontifical Council for the laity.<sup>1</sup> Their vision is to foster ‘a culture of sport’ that is ‘an instrument of peace and brotherhood among peoples’ (Glatz 2004: 12).

Unfortunately, the reality of big-business competitive sport in the Western world, especially America,<sup>2</sup> is a far cry from such a utopia. Ladd and Mathisen (1999: 93) note that ‘problems in the sports culture (cheating, rule violations, ego exaggeration) came to fruition in the 1920s and affected sport for the remainder of the twentieth century’. This corruption and perversion that sport readily exhibits has been highlighted in recent scholarship on sport ethics (Grace 2000; Spencer 2000; Volkwein 1995), the socio-

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<sup>1</sup> The first major publication of the ‘Church and Sport’ office is a collection of papers from an *International Seminar* on sport and Christianity that was attended by 45 people from 18 different countries. See Pontifical Council of the Laity (ed.) (2006) *The world of sport: A field of Christian mission*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, *International Seminar*, Vatican, Italy, 11 – 12 November, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> While our discussion will focus on the competitive nature and pride of American professional sport and

theological status of sport (Ladd & Mathisen 1999; Hoffman 1992; Higgs and Braswell, 2004) and cultural critiques of sport in periodicals, such as *Christianity Today* (Galli 2005). Ethicist, Professor Albert Spencer (2000: 143) identifies one of the main thrusts of these writings, commenting:

There is a growing belief that sport [in America], rather than encouraging moral virtue and spiritual values, promotes just the antithesis: man's inevitable fall from grace through egotism, cynicism, nihilism, an obsessive focus on money, and win at all costs mentality that fosters disrespect for competitors and society. There are frequent news reports about athletes who violate both civil and moral behavioral codes through alcohol and drug abuse, gambling, theft, promiscuity, violence, and even murder.

There exists for many a deep underlying belief system in sport that is laden with values that John Paul II reminded us 'may be used for other purposes, with the danger of corruption and decadence' (Paul 1980: 64). According to Piltz (1995), the reduction in fair play and sportsmanship is rooted amongst other things in a philosophy of 'winning is the only thing' or to 'win at all costs'. In terms of this popular dictum, most notably attributed to Vince Lombardi,<sup>3</sup> it is a conviction that the sport world adopts this view in order to make sense of the many dimensions of the 'sport reality'. When winning

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child and youth sport, many of our assertions could be applied to professional sport worldwide.

<sup>3</sup>Readers should be aware that Lombardi's well used (or abused) quote has oft being used out of context to justify simplistic arguments against competition *per se*. For a thorough history of this quote, see Overman, S. J. (1999) 'Winning isn't everything. It's the only thing': The Origin, Attributions, and Influence of a Famous Football Quote', *Football Studies* 2, 2: 77-99.

becomes the principle of 'being' for competition (and for life), it may have a baneful effect on the experience and personal identity of the athlete, coach or fan.

A major reason for this is that 'for professional players, naturally, sports are no longer pure. Sports are business, a craft, a way to earn a living, a specialization' (Novak, 1994/1967: 164). Catholic Lay theologian and renowned social theorist, Michael Novak has identified and discussed five dimensions of winning that all professional athletes wrestle with in varying degrees. Arguably, the most important reason they are 'no longer pure', is the over-emphasis on winning, at the cost of the playful and joyful elements of sporting activities.<sup>4</sup> As Tony Campolo (1988: 126), Professor of sociology and well-known Christian speaker observes, 'from little league on up, American sports have become far too regimented to allow for much spontaneous fun'.

There exists a significant sports ethics literature, addressing moral issues such as sportsmanship, cheating, doping and the nature of competition, however, very little has been written applying Christian ethics and theology. There are however promising signs. For example, philosopher, Mark Hamilton (2003) recently presented a theological paper at the 2003 annual *International Association of Philosophy of Sport* conference, critiquing our relationship to modern sport using an Augustinian framework.<sup>5</sup> He

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<sup>4</sup> It is not our main task to examine the nature of, or theology of play and leisure, or the differences between sport, play and leisure. However, there is a significant literature that has developed from the seminal work of Dutch historian Johan Huizinga (*Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*, 1950, Boston, MA: Beacon), Catholic theologian, Hugo Rahner (*Man at Play*, 1972, trans. B Battershaw, New York: Herder and Herder) and Thomist philosopher, Joseph Piper, (*Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, 1998/1948, South Bend, Id: St. Augustine Press). For a brief overview in relation to the sport-religion interface, see Mathisen (2005b).

<sup>5</sup> Using Augustine's analysis of evil and immortality and his idea of 'disordered affections/loves', Hamilton discusses a number of issues intimately related to this chapter, such as the prevalence of sin, pride, shame, and idolatry in modern competitive sport, while importantly championing the good of sport when played in the right spirit.

suggests that ‘maybe we should forget about attempting to solve its [sports] problems through piecemeal solutions and attempt to determine whether there is something much greater, more profound, or even metaphysical which lies at the core of our current moral failures in sport and work to correct this (2)?’ We agree, and argue with Mathisen (2002: 30) that there is a real need to start to ‘think biblically and theologically about sport’, if we are to uncover the roots of the ethical and moral dilemmas in modern sport. This chapter will provide a Christian ethical and theological analysis of the ‘cult of winning’ that is embodied in the beliefs and practices indigenous to competitive sports. Our goal is to imaginatively read and place the sport reality (competitive reality) within the world articulated by the gospel, with a specific focus on the ‘wrongs of the system’, while acknowledging that sin ultimately stems from individuals’ hearts. At times our discussion is highly critical of the modern sport world. Therefore, from the outset, we would like to clearly articulate that as lifelong sport competitors, coaches and teachers in the field we champion the good of sport in a balanced theology of leisure.

We will propose that the foundational source of ‘alienation’ and ‘win at all costs’ attitude, can only be fully understood through an examination of underlying spiritual issues, in particular the sin of pride.<sup>6</sup> Although we will not be critiquing sport competition *per se*,<sup>7</sup> some preliminary discussion will be necessary as ‘questions about the importance of winning are closely tied to but not identical with questions about the

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<sup>6</sup> It is probable that in ‘face-to-face’ combative sports, such as football, soccer, ice hockey etc. there is more potential for pride than in ‘side-by-side’ sports such as golf, or at least greater potential for the negative consequences of pride to manifest (i.e., alienation, violence). This said, pride is in essence a ‘sin of the heart’ (Prov. 18: 12) and thus it may be just as prevalent in non-contact, side-by-side sports such as golf, but will not necessarily be shown through behaviour.

<sup>7</sup> Philosophers of sport have written extensively on the nature of competition in sport. For an accessible introduction see Kretchmar, S.R. (2005) ‘Understanding Games, Competition, and Winning’ in *Practical Philosophy of Sport*, 159-180. S. Kretchmar, Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics. For more detailed analyses of competition in sport, see Simon (1991) and Hyland (1978, 1984).

value of competition' (Simon, 1991: 13). Our first task is then to briefly examine the nature of sport and competition and the reasons for the *distortion* of competition and pursuit of winning in modern professional sport.

### **MODERN SPORT: COMPETITION AND 'WINNING AT ALL COSTS'**

Sport, as defined by many sport philosophers, 'is a form of play [or should be], a competitive, rule-governed activity that human beings freely choose to engage' (Clifford & Feezel 1997: 11).<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, since this is a competitive activity, inherent in its structure are the exercise of skills and strategies directed toward meeting a goal(s) in which athletic performances are evaluated and assessed by the particular standards of a specific sport (Sherif 1976). In short, competition involves a serious challenge or contest, in the original Greek the *agon*<sup>9</sup> between players resulting in a winner and loser - a *zero-sum* situation. From this, some scholars have seriously questioned the moral value of competition in sport and other institutions *per se* (e.g., Kohn, 1992), arguing that it usually has negative consequences for the loser(s). Nonetheless, there seems to be a general consensus among sport philosophers, psychologists and theologians that competition in most human endeavours, when correctly understood provides the opportunity for self-discovery, experiencing excellence and building social and national relations.

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<sup>8</sup>Defining sport is a slippery challenge. We follow others in that play, games and sport are contiguous but as we move from play to sport we begin to introduce some important modifications: 'more restrictive rules, more difficulty in achieving goals, the development of physical skills and use of physical exertion, and the necessity of competition'. See Visker, T. (1994: 174) 'Play, Game, and Sport in a Reformed, Biblical Worldview', in *Christianity and Leisure: Issues in a Pluralistic Society*, eds. Paul Heintzman, Glen A. Van Andel and Thomas Visker. Dordt, IA.: Dordt College Press. For a more detailed discussion concerning the definitions see Loland, S. (2002: 2-16) *Fair Play in Sport: A Moral Norm System*, London: Routledge.

<sup>9</sup>For a scholarly but accessible analysis of the Greek concept of *agon*, see Pfitzner, V.C. (1967) *Paul and the Agon Motif: Traditional Athletic Imagery in the Pauline Literature*, Leiden: E.J. Brill.

Etymologically, the word competition derives from the Latin *com-petito*, to strive or question together (Hyland, 1988). Idealistically, competition in sport can then be conceived as a ‘mutually acceptable quest for excellence’, in which opponents *cooperate* to bring the best out in one another. On a positive note, Simon (1991: 33) believes, as we do, that competition in sport is ethically defensible and that the ‘meeting of the demands athletes place upon their talents often involves beauty, courage, dedication, and passion’. This said, the finely balanced dialectic of sport competition, which often involves ‘intense passion’, also carries the ever present risk that ‘such intensity will devolve into alienation and violence’ (Hyland, 1988: 177). Or as, Robert Nye (1973: 88) comments in his psycho-social account of competition, ‘any type of competition . . . contains the seeds for mutual hostility’, at a personal, group and national level. This is clearly articulated by Professor Brian Aitken (1992: 239), in his oft-cited essay, *Sports, Religion and Human Well-Being*:

In contemporary sport we are confronted with a perverted or alienated form of winning. Today winning does not involve just the desire to demonstrate a superiority of skills which is the normal goal of any game; rather, it involves an inordinate desire to win in an absolute sense.

One does not have to trawl the sports ethics literature for evidence of this. A cursory glance at the sports media and advertising will suffice. The world of child and youth and professional competitive sport is replete with dubious messages and stories of corruption and nationalistic fervour. For example, for those athletes whose identities are embedded in sport, the prophets of modern media herald, ‘You are nothing until you are



number one,’ ‘You don’t win silver, you lose gold’ (Nike Ad), ‘Nice guys finish last, there’s no such word as chicken, and every time you lose you die a little’ (Kohn, 1992: 118), and ‘Second place is the first loser’.<sup>10</sup> For some, these are merely hyperboles. But for others, these transform sport into more than a game and invoke fear, anxiety and the potential for experiencing a loss of identity and self-worth through failure in sport. Reports of physical and psychological abuse, especially in child and youth sport, further demonstrates the moral morass that exists.

A recent story in *U.S. News and World Report* describes how children across America are sometimes subjected to ridiculous and ugly situations with coaches and parents (Cary 2004). In this special report, Fred Engh, founder of the National Alliance for Youth Sports, shares about a father telling his kid, ‘You little bastard, you could never get anything right.’ Another father who yells, ‘I am gonna get you tonight because you let me down, buddy’ (2004: 45). In addition, Peter Carey, *U.S. News*, records a survey in South Florida in 1999 where 82 percent of 500 adults indicated that parents were too aggressive and 56 percent said they observed overly aggressive actions.

Similarly, in elite professional sport this life-view often results in alienation and violence, masquerading as athletic prowess. Violence may become a means to justify and validate in sport.<sup>11</sup> Of course, there are the infamous examples like Tanya Harding,

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<sup>10</sup> Contrary to the competitive and status driven ethos of the modern world shown through this type of media advertising, at the heart of the Gospel is the idea that God loves and cares for each and every person, regardless of social status, abilities, wealth or past wrongs. God’s grace can *not* be earned on merit, it is a *free* gift to *any* person who asks and believes in their heart (Rom. 10: 8-10). For an accessible and heart-warming account of grace, see Manning, B. (2004) *The ragamuffin gospel: Embracing the unconditional love of God*, Milton Keynes, UK: Authentic Media.

<sup>11</sup> We see much fruit in Rene Girard’s discussion about ‘mimetic rivalry’ and the application of this to competitive sports as a staging ground for violence. See Rene Girard, *Things Hidden Since the*

Vinny Jones, Mike Tyson and Latrell Sprewell, but violence and alienation are expressed in a myriad of ways. The following are examples, many of which can be applied to children's and youth sports as well, of how certain actions and values have institutionalised this cult of victory:<sup>12</sup>

- A willingness to mistreat (acts of violence and aggression) and even 'hate' the opponent for they are the main obstacles to winning. The warlike rhetoric of annihilation used by many coaches, acts as a form of arousal or motivation so that the opponent is objectified as the enemy. What is valued is more of a military style victory (might makes right) by the different soldier-athletes, rather than a mutual moral quest for fair play and respect for human relationships.
- From this, we are left with a competitive ethic that stresses survival at virtually all costs not only at the expense of the opponent but also at the expense of the athlete's body. Performance-enhancing drugs, surgical enhancements, injured players competing through pain and assuming serious risks to body and mind, unhealthy eating habits (and disorders, i.e., bulimia and anorexia nervosa) and drastic weight reduction among some women gymnasts, wrestlers and jockeys and extreme

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*Foundation of the World*, trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metter (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 1987).

<sup>12</sup>See the following for other and more specific examples and a greater analysis of the moral evaluation of this belief system: Robert Hughes and Jay Coakley, 'Positive Deviance Among Athletes: The Implications of Overconformity to the Sport Ethic,' *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 8, (1991): 307-325; Angela Lumpkin, Sharon Kay Stoll and Jennifer M. Beller, *Sport Ethics: Applications and Fair Play* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2003).

training regiments among endurance type athletes, exemplify the kind of action of this life view.<sup>13</sup>

- The practice of deceiving officials, bending rules, looking for loopholes in rules and the ritual of trash talking, along with other purposeful intimidation are forms of negative and potentially damaging behaviour.<sup>14</sup> For example, psychological antics like showboating/strutting, or trying to take an opponent out, would appear alien and inane without this belief because these practices are not a necessary condition for sport to exist or flourish. Moreover, the loser is belittled and booed (withheld praise), and sometimes given extreme workouts for their failure to win, and other negative reinforcement, such as verbal and physical abuse, thus ritualising the importance of this doctrine.

In his book, *Games and Empires: Modern Sports and Cultural Imperialism*, sports historian, Allen Guttman (1994) has defined the formal structures of 'modern sports', which undoubtedly imbibe the 'win at all costs' doctrine and oft lead to the consequences outlined above. He describes in detail how the character of western modern sports has evolved from the industrial, scientific, capitalist, imperial, and cultural developments of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>15</sup> He identifies seven defining

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<sup>13</sup>For extensive documentation of most of these issues, see Howe, P.D. (2004) *Sport, Professionalism and Pain*, London: Routledge. Those wishing, to explore what is arguably the most recent theological-ethical dilemma (alongside Genetic enhancement) in professional sport, that is, surgical enhancement such as LASIK eye surgery for golfers and rotator cuff surgery (not *corrective*) for baseball players, we refer readers to Hamilton, M. (in press) Elective Performance Enhancement Surgery for Athletes: Should it be Resisted? *Gymnica*.

<sup>14</sup> In reviewing this chapter, Professor Scott Kretchmar pointed out that these immoral principals in sport are a kind of 'instrumental ethic', that is, things that used to be deemed as wrong in a moral sense are now considered largely (if not wholly) in terms of their efficacy—Do they work?. One of the outcomes of instrumental thinking is the loss of the notion of a "meaningful victory" in the quest to 'win at all costs'.

<sup>15</sup> There is no room here to develop this theme but it is important to note that Guttman emphasises that the

characteristics of 'modern sport'. Six of these, especially the 'secularisation' of modern sport, are particularly helpful in illustrating the structural foundation of the 'win at all costs mentality' and in turn reasons for the gradual decline in the non-utilitarian play ethic in modern sport (Guttman, 1994: 2-3):

- **SECULARISM:** despite their tendency to become ritualized and to arouse strong emotions, modern sports are not related--as premodern sports often were--to some transcendent realm of the numinous or sacred;
- **BUREAUCRATIZATION:** modern sports are typically governed neither by priestly conclaves nor by ritual adepts but rather by national and transnational bureaucracies (of which the United States Olympic Committee and the *Fédération Internationale de Football Association* are examples);
- **SPECIALIZATION:** many modern sports have evolved, like rugby, soccer, baseball, and American football, from earlier, less differentiated games, and many, like cricket, baseball, and football, have a gamut of specialized roles and playing positions;
- **RATIONALIZATION:** the rules of modern sports are constantly scrutinized and undergo frequent revision from a means-ends point of view; athletes train

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*reasons* for the character of 'modern sports' 'are complex and much disputed' (4). For our purposes, however, it is sufficient to note that these socio-cultural developments emphasise the importance of 'achievement and winning' and thus provide increased *potential* for the sin of pride. The principal reason we argue that is at the root of the many ethical and moral problems in modern sport.

scientifically, employ technologically advanced equipment, and strive for the most efficient employment of their skills;

- **QUANTIFICATION:** in modern sports, as in almost every other aspect of our lives, we live in a world of numbers; the "stats" have become an apparently indispensable part of the game;
- **THE OBSESSION WITH RECORDS:** the unsurpassed quantified achievement, which is what we mean by "record" in this uniquely modern usage, is a constant challenge to all who strive to surpass it and thereby to achieve a modern version of immortality.

It can then be legitimately argued that for some athletes and fans, modern sport, especially the dimension of winning with its many potential extrinsic rewards, has become a 'ritualised obsession', and even a vehicle for 'immortalising the self'.<sup>16</sup> In his paper, aptly sub-titled *The Religious Aesthetics of Sport as Postmodern Salvific Moments*, religious studies scholar, Michael Grimshaw (2000) has provided a thorough examination of this notion. He maintains that 'sports provides a post-Christian "pagan mythology" of "fallible gods"', through which athletes and fans can experience the mystical 'yet without the other-worldly connotations of a traditional understanding' (87, 92). Similar to Buddhist scholar, Charles Prebish (1993), Grimshaw's understanding of

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<sup>16</sup> For a thorough sociological analysis of this point, see Schmitt and Leonard (1986: 1088), who examine 'the processes through which Americans seek to leave their mark [identity] through achievements in sport'. This work adds support to our thesis and that of Grimshaw (2000), exploring the role of athletes' and fans' identity construction, the sports hero/idol, competition and the related economic and political drivers in modern sport.

athletes and fans aesthetic- mystical experience, or what he calls a ‘total now-ness of being’,<sup>17</sup> can be understood as a ‘postmodern salvific experience’.

Unlike, Prebish (1993: 70) however, who suggests that aesthetic experiences in sport can provide ‘redemption into a new type of reality . . . permeated with ultimacy and Holiness’, Grimshaw (2000) recognises the need for the theological deconstruction of this pagan mythology. It is worth quoting at length from his discourse, as his comments provide the evidence base for our discussion of the deeper spiritual problems that we will argue drive the modern world of sport:

It is increasingly obvious in today’s market-driven world that the promotion of sports people as role models results in their co modification. This occurs because we misinterpret what occurs in sports, positing sports stars as liminal figures between modernist dualistic assumptions of the real and unreal of the secular and religious and of the sacred and profane. In doing so we deny and negate their humanity--and, in an uncritical acceptance and worship, we denigrate our own . . . sports stars have become promoted and co modified as objects of veneration and an anticipatory end in themselves, for, fundamentally, who they are (or at least appear to be) and not for what they can achieve. The result of this is they become what is termed the hyper-real. This refers to the situation where the symbol of something (in this case the sports star) replaces and negates any actual reality of that person in popular understanding. This results in a media-driven and perpetuated scenario

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<sup>17</sup>This is comparable to states of Flow and Zen, Deep Play and Peak Experiences that are widely documented in the sports literature. See my chapter, *Nature and transcendence: The mystical and sublime*

whereby the consciously fabricated image of symbol is believed to be expressing a truth and an experience that is “better than the real” . . . In one sense this reflects the crisis of belief experienced in Western post-Christian society and especially the problems for belief after Nietzsche proclaimed in the 1960s confirmed the “death of God”. For if “God is dead”, then who are we who were supposedly created “*imago dei*” (in the image of God)? Even if for many God is not so much dead as either absent or irrelevant, does not the overwhelming co modification of contemporary life entice into idolatrous hyper-real longing, where it is the image of the image of the (sporting) god that so many strive to attain and achieve? Do we now abase ourselves at the Nike-shod feet of a new pantheon of gods, whereby worship is undertaken and achieved by ritualistic acquisition? Are we led to believe that by buying their uniform, wearing their shoes, drinking their drink and eating their burger we can achieve symbolic unification with our idol, who is often never more than a pixilated image on a screen, a flat image on a poster? . . . For while our “idolatry” in sport is an attempt to present our “fallible gods” as perfect, in fact it is their very fallibility that results in our giving them special status, for what they (though recognizably fallible) can still achieve it is this that is important. It is what they can achieve (if only for the most fleetingly temporal moment), that is of the ultimate importance and value, not who they are. At heart the issue is one of what a religious reading of sport might entail. The first, most familiar and traditional

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*in extreme sports.*

reading is what I would call a functionalist and ritualistic view. This argues that sport contains elements of religion and so within sport can be recognized sacred sites, sacred rituals, sacred festivals, sacred songs, sacred texts, saviour and heretical figures, times of persecution, reformation and so on. It is from such a reading that I could claim that “Rugby is New Zealand’s national religion” (89-91).

Grimshaw's (2000) closing comments highlight what is a major theme in past writings on the sport-religion interface, that is, how scholars have in varying ways attempted to demonstrate the similarities and parallels between modern sport experience (both for participants and spectators) and primordial and modern religious rites, rituals and symbols. In turn, they have championed a ‘religion of sport’, in the guise of sport *as a* ‘natural religion’ (Novak, 1994/1967) or ‘popular religion’ (Price, 2001). In a post-Christian culture, this ‘ritualizing of culture’ and the resultant ‘theologies of society’, Grimshaw observes is symptomatic of the modern tendency to perpetuate ‘the notion of universal religious archetypes’ (95).

Following the critique of Higgs and Braswell (2004),<sup>18</sup> we would argue sport is *not* by definition formally a religion. Nonetheless, worldviews operate from the heart and thus a human-being can conscript a cultural activity like sport to try and answer these most fundamental questions. In this case when sport is *inflated* or *substituted* for religion then it has become an idol.<sup>19</sup> At a theologico-ethical level, this means that the idea and

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<sup>18</sup> In their comprehensive book, *An Unholy Alliance: The Sacred and Modern Sports* (2004), Higgs and Braswell have provided a ‘trenchant’ critique of the writings of a group of scholars they call the ‘sport apologists’, which for the most part supports many of the ideas in this chapter.

<sup>19</sup> An idol can be defined as any object, idea or person that is worshipped in the place of God (Ex. 20: 4).



application of 'win at all costs' ethic, becomes the soil in which the personal (of athlete, coach, parent or fan) and structural sins (of institutions) of pride and idolatry are borne. Our next task is then to provide a theological analysis of competition in sport and discussion of these points. A particular focus will be on the sin of pride, which the great 20<sup>th</sup> century scholar, C.S. Lewis (1997/1952: 100), called the 'Great Sin' the 'essential vice, the utmost evil . . . the virtue opposite to it, in Christian morals, is called humility'.

## **PRIDE AND HUMILITY IN COMPETITIVE SPORT**

While acknowledging that studies in sport philosophy, psychology (Walker, 1980; Nye, 1973), anthropology (Mead, 1937) and religious studies (Newman, 1989) have greatly contributed to our understanding of human competition, we propose there is something far darker and more insidious at the root of the problems in modern sport. Although, western culture has largely rejected the notion of an evil force in the universe that is diametrically opposed to a supernatural God and His purpose in the world, this is a fundamental part of the Christian story.<sup>20</sup> As Hamilton (2003: 7) notes in his theological critique of modern sport, we must recognise that 'the [root] cause of evil in the limited microcosm of sport is the same as that which is the cosmic cause of evil'.

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Idols may include money, human relationships, sport, religion, music, sex, etc.

<sup>20</sup> It is likely that this worldview maybe entirely foreign, or only partly understood by some readers. It may be helpful to consider why Hollywood blockbusters such as *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe* and *Harry Potter* have such universal appeal. The central premise of all these films is an 'internal and external' battle between good and evil that we can all relate to in our daily existence. For an interesting take on this see Johnson, K.K. (2005) 'Christian Theology as Depicted in *The Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter* books', *Journal of Religion and Society*, 7. Online. Available from <http://moses.creighton.edu/JRS/2005/2005-5.html>. For a brief and accessible account of evil (principalities and powers) from a mainstream Christian perspective see the Banks, R. and Stevens, P. (1997) *The Complete Book of Everyday Christianity*, IL, USA: Intervarsity Press. Available Online. <http://www.ivmdl.org/cbec.cfm?study=10>

Theologically, because of the spiritual crises we all share with Adam, Reinhold Niebuhr (1964: 178) declared that ‘man is insecure and involved in natural contingency; he seeks to overcome his insecurity by a will-to-power which overreaches the limits of human creatureliness’. In sport, when winning is the primary aim of the athlete or coach, we see the desperate and even bizarre attempts by athletes and coaches to address the angst of their human predicament by doing anything and everything to reach their goal and bolster their identity and sense of significance. It is this driven, single-minded striving to ‘win at all costs’ that often leads to boasting of achievements, alienation of others (i.e., opponents and family members) and violence and cheating in sport, which we maintain flows from a prideful heart.

Considering that the postmodern consciousness is characteristically self-centered and self-sufficient and the world of sport is a naturally competitive environment, the potential for pride to corrupt and alienate is ever present. ‘Pride is *essentially* competitive above all other vices’, wrote C.S. Lewis (1997/1952: 101), that is, any human endeavour that involves competition, also presents the *temptation* for individuals to become prideful. Nowhere is this temptation more prominent than in American culture,<sup>21</sup> in which the quest to be “better than” has reached ‘exaggerated, often ludicrous proportions’ (Kohn, 1992: 2-3). Lombardi himself once stated ‘The zeal to be first in everything has always been American, to win and to win and to win’<sup>22</sup> In his

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<sup>21</sup> Although we are focusing on what seems to be a *generally* ‘explicit pride’ in American culture/sport, this is arguably *no worse*, for example, than the ‘defensive pride’ that appears to be deeply imbedded in the British psyche. Of course, these cultural differences have historical determinants, not least in relation to a nation’s past experience of invasion and wars and monarchical and constitutional/state structure and foundations.

<sup>22</sup> Cited in Overman (1997: 226).

most well-known book, *Mere Christianity* (1997/1952), Lewis illustrates the often subtle dynamics of human pride that can be applied to competitive sport:

It was through Pride that the devil [an external evil force] became the devil: Pride leads to every other vice: it is the complete anti-God state of mind. Does this seem exaggerated? If so, think it over. In fact, if you want to find out how proud you are the easiest way is to ask yourself, 'How much do I dislike it when other people snub me, or refuse to take any notice of me, or shove their oar in, or patronise me, or show off?'<sup>23</sup> The point is that each person's pride is in competition with every one else's pride. Two of a trade never agree [consider bitter rivals in sport or academia] . . . Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next man . . . people are proud of being richer, cleverer, or better looking [or better at sport] than others . . . It is the comparison that makes you proud: the pleasure of being above the rest . . . for of course, power is what pride really enjoys: there is nothing makes a man feel so superior to others . . . It is a terrible thing that the worst of all the vices can smuggle itself into the very centre of our religious life . . . as pride is direct from hell, it is purely spiritual, consequently it is far more deadly and subtle . . . Pride is spiritual cancer:

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<sup>23</sup> 'Showing off' often takes the form of athletes, coaches and parents *boasting* (and gossiping about others) about past achievements or their abilities and is arguably a very common form of pride. Let us consider the following Proverbs: 'the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts' (Ja. 3: 5) and 'where there are many words, sin is not absent, but he who holds his tongue is wise' (Pv. 10: 19).

it eats up the very possibility of love, or contentment, or even common sense (101-104).<sup>24</sup>

In concluding his discussion of pride, Lewis (1997/1952) makes a number of qualifying statements that are important in our examination of pride in sport, that is, *not* all forms of pride are evil and unhealthy. Pertinent examples he gives, include: the 'pleasure of being praised' (e.g., by a parent, friend, coach, fan, teacher etc) as long as this feeling does not result in self-adulation and vanity; parents pride in their children (e.g., for sports performance or achievement) that Lewis describes as a 'warm hearted admiration for'. This healthy admiration can, however, easily dissolve into parents living their life vicariously through their children's sport, academic, or musical achievements. A prideful and damaging scenario that Overman (1997) and many others argue is rife in American sport. 'Parents relive personal successes and failures in their children. They use children as an extension of their own ego needs, seeking reassurance of their own sense of self-worth in their children' (244) remarks Overman. In light of Lewis' call for moderation in how we understand pride, it is vital not to 'throw the baby out with the bath water' and demonize competitive sport and physical activity altogether, as for example did *some* sections of the Medieval Church and the seventeenth century English Puritans reformers.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Within his chapter *The Great Sin*, Lewis does differentiate between 'diabolical pride' and what I would term 'defensive pride'. Lewis defines 'black diabolical pride' as 'when you look down on others so much that you do not care what they think of you' (104), which is often the root of power-mad dictators. Defensive pride is in some ways (however, a Christian should be able to forgive *all* sin however despicable, by the *grace* of God) more forgivable, as it is normally rooted in unconscious emotional and spiritual wounds of the individual acting out of a proud heart, due to their *need* to appear *better than* their opponent, or who they have *fantasised* as their opponent in some human endeavor. Also see footnote 36.

<sup>25</sup> For documentation of the Puritan dislike for sport see Mathisen (2005b) and for discussion of the role of sport and play in Medieval times see Hoffman, S.J. (manuscript in preparation, *Unintentional Fouls: Christians and the Sport Problem*, Baylor University Press). Hoffman makes the important point that medieval theologians, especially after Aquinas, were on the whole open to play and sport, with some

In remaining true to our thesis though, we maintain with Bud Williams (2004: 7) that in modern sport ‘the real battlefield is not the game, the playing field, but in us, in our hearts and minds, ultimately our will to right or wrong. It is a battle for control of self--to play toward excellence and control of self to play fairly within the rules and the spirit of the contest’. This is, as psychologist Paul Vitz (1994/1977: 91) states in his trenchant critique of humanistic psychology, the struggle between the ‘relentless and single-minded search for and glorification of the self [rooted in pride]’ which ‘is at direct cross purposes with the Christian injunction to lose the self [to seek humility]’.<sup>26</sup> From a theological perspective, the principal enemy in this battle in sport is the oft *deeply seated* and *unconscious* vice of pride, deeply seated, in that pride is something that most people, including Christians, fail to see in themselves but *hate* in others (Lewis, 1997/1952). We must however guard against simplistic arguments that attribute all moral wrongs in sport, or everyday life, to pride that is induced by an external evil force.

Hinting at this, Lewis in his clever and imaginative work, *The Screwtape Letters* (1942: 9), famously warned against the ‘two equal and opposite errors’ into which our race can fall concerning evil. These are, for people to ‘disbelieve in its existence’ or to have an ‘unhealthy interest in it’ (rather than focusing on, and trusting in, the goodness, love and grace of God) and in turn often attempt to relinquish their responsibility (i.e., their free-will to *choose*) for wrong behaviour by blaming this external evil force. We concur with

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strict provisos of course.

<sup>26</sup> For a comparative analysis of ‘identity’ from a humanistic and Christian perspective that draws on the ideas of Augustine, Kierkegaard, Merton, Pascal and Rahner etc., see Morea, P. (1997) *In Search of Personality: Christianity and Modern Psychology*, London: SCM Press.

Kohn (1992: 97) who states, ‘the reasons for trying to be successful at the price of other people’s failure are numerous and multilayered’ but would also point to the spiritual dimension. Thus, we hold to the idea that pride is at the root of much wrong in sport and that humility, ‘the virtue opposite to that in Christian morals’ (Lewis, 1997/1952: 100) is the principal remedy.

For those within the Christian tradition the ultimate act of humility was that the God of the universe should enter the world by sending his son to reconcile us to himself through the crucifixion and resurrection (2 Cor. 5: 18-19).<sup>27</sup> Humility was the very essence of Jesus character: ‘learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart’ (Matt. 11: 29). He exhibited the ‘fruits of the spirit’ described in Galatians (5: 22-25),<sup>28</sup> ‘love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control’, in His very being and in his relations to others. Consider, are these virtues normally found, or easily practiced, in modern sporting contests? In comparing and contrasting the fruits of the ‘Holy spirit’ with the modern ‘sporting spirit’, scholars, Higgs and Braswell (2004: 262) suggest not:

How do you prepare for an agonistic [contest] event for months by rigorous training, defeat a worthy opponent in public contest for a worldly prize and glory, and still be an example of “gentleness” and “meekness,” to

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<sup>27</sup>The circumstances and reason for the crucifixion itself, is an acute example of how pride in competitive sport situations fuelled by the need to be ‘number one’ and feel and maintain power, can lead to alienation and the *ultimate act of violence*. Ultimately, it was the *pride* and *fear* of the Jewish and Roman leaders losing their power and social standing and traditions that led to the crucifixion of Jesus (Jn. 11: 47-48; Mk. 15: 15; Lk. 22: 2). If readers think this parallel is an exaggeration, consider the recent death of a young French tennis player who was drugged by one of his opponent's fathers, in the desperate quest for his son to 'win at all costs'. Of course, acts of pride, alienation and violence in sport exist on a continuum and this is an extreme example.

name only a couple of the famous “fruit”? Is this also as difficult to do as a camel going through “the eye of a needle”? To make matters more complicated, what if the winning athlete in question makes a quarter of a billion dollars per decade?<sup>29</sup>

We are in agreement with the authors in so much that the modern professional sporting arena is perhaps not a place where humility and love are common currency and the ‘system of competitive sport’ certainly does not encourage these virtues. However, we do feel along with others (Lofton, 2004)<sup>30</sup> that Higgs and Braswell (2004), while explicitly adopting a metaphorical approach in their scholarly and thought provoking book, *at times* overstate and dichotomize various aspects of the relationship between sport and religion. For example, they contend that ‘it is not realistic (or fair) to expect sports to build the fruits of the spirit defined by Paul’ (262). To be sure, sporting contests should never replace the well-worn paths of prayer, study, fellowship and worship as methods for gaining intimacy with God and developing the fruits of the spirit (only by *grace*). But we do see them as *potential* places of learning and virtuous character development,<sup>31</sup> in which athletes can learn about different forms of love,<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> All biblical quotations are taken from the NIV International Bible Society (Ed.). (2002). *Bible: New International Version*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.

<sup>29</sup> Higgs and Braswell (see 97-115) make the important point as have others (Weiss, P. 1969, *Sport: A Philosophic Inquiry*, Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press) that sports stars do no wrong in earning large amounts of money but it does ‘undermine the possibility of holiness in sports’, i.e., the potential for corruption, greed and idolatry are increased if large sums of money are involved. As the bible suggests, ‘For the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil’ (1 Tim. 6: 10a) *not* ‘money is evil’.

<sup>30</sup> While Lofton’s book review on religion and masculinity addresses Higgs (1995) earlier book (*God in the Stadium: Sports and Religion in America*, Lexington: University Press of Kentucky) the tenor and method of the argument is very similar to his more recent collaborative work (Higgs and Braswell, 2004).

<sup>31</sup> It has long been debated as to whether sport can lead to character development, which is of course dictated by how one defines character and how one understands sport competition. See chapter 5, *Does Competition Build Character?*, of Kohn’s (1992) book for a good overview, although we think he overstates the negative aspects of competition, while giving little thought to potential positives.

<sup>32</sup> Etymologically the word love has four root meanings (Greek) that are important to understand in the context of relations in sport competition. These are: *storge* (affection), the love we have for family, especially parents to children, but also children to parents; *philia* (platonic), love expressed towards our friends; *eros* (sexual desire), the state of ‘being in love’, a healthy sexual desire toward one’s partner; and

patience, compassion and self-sacrifice. This *potential* is of course predicated on whether or not the athlete or coach is ‘actively seeking the good’, that is, a humble, gracious and respectful approach to others when engaged in sport contests and in relations with others.

On this note, Andrew Murray, in his classic devotional text, *Humility* (1982) describes below how it is ‘insignificances of daily life’ (we are not suggesting that sport is insignificant), especially in our relations with others that reflect our true character. It is relationships, in particular with people who ‘irritate and trouble us’ (Murray, 1982: 63) that are often the ‘crucible of sanctification’, that is, the means to developing virtues listed in St. Paul’s letter to the Galatians (5: 22-25):

It is in our most unguarded moments [in the heart of a sporting contest] that we really show and see what we are. To know the humble man [or woman], to know how the humble man behaves, you must follow him in the common course of his life . . . Humility before God is nothing if not proved in humility before men [or woman] . . . It is in our relationships to one another, in our treatment of one another [in sporting contests], that the true lowliness of mind and the humility of heart are to be seen . . .

Amid what are considered the temptations to impatience and touchiness,

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*agape* (unconditional love or charity), the unconditional love of God for humanity (divine gift-love) and the unconditional (as far as it can be) and *willed* love of humans towards others without expecting anything in return, esp. to those who do not deserve our love, our enemies, i.e., those who annoy/offend us. While all four aspects of love are interrelated and balance between them in relationships is vital, we would argue that *philia* and *agape* love are those most needed for virtuous and humble relations with others in sport competition, as often one would need to *willfully choose* to love others even when wronged or incited to verbally or physically retaliate. If sport had become an *idol* in an athlete’s life leading to familial relational problems, then it would be *storge* that is being neglected. For an overview, see, Lewis, C.S. (1960) *The Four Loves*, London: Fontanna Books.



to hard thoughts and sharp words [trash talk, verbal abuse and intimidation] . . . the humble man [or woman] shows it in his [her] life.

Following this, and recent empirical work (Schroeder and Scribner, 2006)<sup>33</sup> it could then be argued that in sporting contests, *including those of a physical and aggressive nature*, there is a possibility of nurturing virtues in an athlete's character, rather than engendering pride. For male athletes, John Eldridge's book, *Wild at Heart: Discovering the Secret of a Man's Soul* (2001), lends support to this view in arguing that 'authentic masculinity' (like that of Jesus and the prophets) in a domesticated western world is rare and that men have become emasculated, particularly Christian men, principally through a Church that often advocates the need for men to be 'nice'.<sup>34</sup> He suggests that men are to varying degrees intrinsically competitive (which directed in the right way is responsible for much of the good in the world), desire adventure and relish physical challenge, but that these dimensions of masculinity are scarce in the modern world.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> The findings of Schroeder and Scribner's qualitative study examining the role of religion in American inter-collegiate athletics, suggests that 'humility and graciousness' were values that were encouraged by coaching staff and administrators in a Christian college. Participants noted that the *faith* and *skill* of the staff were important in teaching. For example, being taught how to view winning as process oriented rather than outcome orientated and the values of perseverance and self-discipline. These findings cannot of course be generalised to the wider culture of professional sport, but they do suggest that through *education* and the *example or witness* of significant others (coaches etc) athletes can learn about their faith and develop virtues from sporting competition.

<sup>34</sup> This 'niceness' often manifests itself in the form of 'false humility' and a superficial and shallow understanding and practice of Christianity. Jesus and his followers are often viewed as 'weak' (e.g., needing an emotional crutch) and the teachings they follow (the bible) as a type of 'fluffy spirituality' by the modern world. A cursory reading of the *gospels* and the book of *Acts*, however should quickly dispense with any such sentimentality, demonstrating that Christ and to a lesser degree his disciples, although humble, meek and loving, were also 'masculine', courageous and *willing to die* for the Love of God and His work in the world.

<sup>35</sup> There are clear links here to the concept of Muscular Christianity and Plato's idea of *Thumos* (a primal manly force involved in sex, morality and fighting) that was used by Charles Kingsley in developing his doctrine of Christian manliness. See the first author's chapter, *Muscular Christianity in the Modern Age: "Winning for Christ" or "Playing for Glory"?*

For the most part, we endorse Eldridge's view, but also grant along with Higgs and Braswell (2004) that the 'acid test' for the athlete in any competitive sporting encounter, is whether they come away having learned something about themselves and others and with *a commitment to change* and grow in humility and virtuous character. This is in contrast to an athlete's prideful quest for 'victory at all costs' that leads to the alienation of others and paradoxically, often physical, psychological and spiritual harm to themselves.<sup>36</sup> Building on this theme, our next task is then to examine the 'direction' and 'underlying motivations' of the institutions of sport that are largely responsible for cultivating and nurturing the 'win at all costs' motto.

## **INSTITUTIONS, HEROES AND IDOLS IN MODERN SPORT**

In her challenging and thought-provoking paper, *Kierkegaard and Sport: Willing One Thing in Competitive Sports*, Cindy White (2004) asks the question, 'could sports be one of those powers that have such a grip in our corporate consciousness that we are forgetting what is good?'. Following Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), who castigated the lukewarm domesticated Danish Church in the nineteenth century, she suggests that 'the game is being spoiled and it is happening so slowly that few can see the

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<sup>36</sup> This is most likely a psychological and behavioral manifestation of deep, probably unconscious, emotional and spiritual wounds that results in the athlete suffering from 'defensive pride/masks' or what Christian psychologists may call 'fig leaves' (Gen. 3: 7), in order to *hide* from the 'real self' and feelings of shame and inadequacy. While there is no room here to expand upon this point, in brief the Christian story suggests that in order to overcome the false self, a person can *decide* to allow the *grace* of the Holy Spirit to help them gradually *surrender every dimension of their life* into the care and guidance of a loving Father God. This results in the person's *identity* being rooted in the love of God, the source of their being (Eph. 3: 17b; Rom. 8), thus, they will have *less* need for 'fig' leaves and an obsessive striving to win-at-all-costs and in turn alienating others etc. For a short but incisive account of the idea of surrender in the Christian tradition, see Murray, A. (2005) *Absolute surrender*, Bridge-Logos Publishers. For a clear and detailed description of emotional and spiritual wounds, their consequences and the road to surrender and healing, see Swiss psychiatrist, Paul Tournier's work, esp. *The healing of persons* (1965, San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row Publishers). And Frost, J. (2002) *Experiencing the Father's embrace: Finding acceptance in the arms of a loving God*, USA, FL: Charisma House.

disintegration because our identity as a nation [America] and as individuals is so wrapped up in sports culture' (1). This is of course the obsessively competitive sports culture that has its 'ideological roots' in the Protestant work ethic, which dominated the evolution of 'American religion along with other national institutions' (Overman, 1997: 93).<sup>37</sup>

In his influential book, *The Influence of the Protestant Ethic on Sport and Recreation* (1997: 217), Steve Overman demonstrates that 'the emphasis on achievement pervades virtually every American Institution, but nowhere is the need to achieve more pervasive and compelling than in sport'. He adds weight to Lewis' argument for the essentially competitive nature of pride, by identifying how endemic the idea that 'status and achieved success equate to salvation'. Ultimately, the sin of pride in sport competition operates through the thoughts and actions of individual men and women, although of course this often manifests itself in societal institutions.

Margaret Mead's (1937) famous anthropological field work showed that individual competitiveness is conditioned by the dominant social philosophy of that society, what she called 'enculturation'. Of course, any one society or sports team is not exclusively competitive or exclusively cooperative and the dialectic between these two is complex (Newman, 1989). It is though clear that the West, in particular America is *predominantly competitive* and we should not underestimate how deeply this idiom lies in the American psyche. A 'predatory' and 'consumerist' culture, as the social

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<sup>37</sup> In light of the ongoing 'nature v nurture' debate, although we provide a historical and cultural (i.e., institutional) basis for our argument in this section, we maintain that the temptation to be proud is inherent in *our base nature* (Rom 7. 14-25) but this is fuelled by historical and cultural antecedents (nurture).

economist Thorstein Veblen (1870/1899) called it, which is based upon the mutually beneficial alliance of sports, religion, government and warfare. As both ‘athletic and economic competitions are highly institutionalised’ (Newman, 1989: 31), there is a constant temptation for sports men and women and institutions to sin.<sup>38</sup> Remember, the sin of pride is in essence competitive and ‘people are proud of being richer [better at sport] or more powerful’, which is unashamedly a characteristic of the American collegiate system.

As early as the 1960s recruiting ‘star athletes’ for colleges, and high schools even, had become highly competitive. ‘Aggressive recruiters’ allegedly using ‘bribes of money, automobiles, privileges, and sexual favours [often illegally] to secure their services’ (Overman, 1997: 230), what Carroll (1983) calls ‘blue chip athletes’. A well-known problem of this deeply corrupted system, however ‘seldom expressed’, is how many American universities, including *so-called* Christian institutions, exploit young, often black athletes, providing very little in the way of a worthwhile academic education (Campolo, 1988). Institutions commonly ‘have little regard for them [athletes] beyond how many points they score and how many ticket buying fans they can lure through the gates’ (124).<sup>39</sup> As Schmitt and Leonard (1986: 1104) observe, when sports become a means of immortality (i.e., idolatry) for the masses, ‘the production of sport heroes, in turn, serves the political economy of sport’. To be sure, excluding a Nobel Laureate on the academic faculty, nothing comes close to possessing sporting stars or highly ranked

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<sup>38</sup> For a detailed analysis of the global sports economy and the aggressive market strategies imbedded in ‘transnational corporate capitalism’, which help promote this worldview, see Silk, M.L., Andrews, D.L., and Cole, C.L. (eds.). (2005) *Sport and Corporate Nationalisms*, New York: Berg.

<sup>39</sup> For further documentation of this point see Hoffman, S.J. (2003) ‘Toward narrowing the Gulf between Sport and Religion’, *Word and World*, 23(3): 303-311.

teams for attaining status and worth (Hollander and Zimmerman, 1967, cited in Overman, 1997: 222). This frequently obsessive and prideful quest for status and economic gain in the American educational system, predictably also operates on a national level.

History has clearly shown that 'whether communist, democratic, or fascist, modern governments have one thing in common -- a reliance upon sports to help define and bolster national pride' (Higgs, 1982).<sup>40</sup> In the build-up to the 2012 Olympics in Beijing, the host nation, China epitomises this in the 'abusive' and disturbing elite child Sporting Academies that have recently been exposed. The list of examples is of course endless, with the 1936 Nazi Olympics perhaps being the most well-known from recent history. One thing is certain though, humility is 'not a virtue conspicuous in any national character' (O'Connor, 1970: 35), especially when it comes to *the use* of national sporting heroes.

'Sporting heroes' are more often than not the vehicle for nationalistic tendencies. They 'serve as symbols of group and national pride . . . International sporting events such as the Olympic games often serve as symbolic conflicts between nations' (Carroll, 1983:47). An example that Carroll gives is the 'national pride' accrued by the American hockey team who defeated the Soviet Union in the 1980 Olympics. While this is so, we agree with Hager (2002:10) that athletes can be seen as heroic, if their actions on and off the field are virtuous and 'contribute to the good of society or our humanity'. Virtues in sport such as fair play, honor, self-sacrifice, courage, respect and love toward

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<sup>40</sup> For a scholarly analysis of the heroic in sport, see Chapters 8 and 9, *The Sports Hero* and *The Sports Fan and Hero-Worshipper* respectively, of Professor Higgs (1982) book. The authors would like to thank

opponents have often been ‘ignored or forgotten in the blind pursuit of victory’ (Hager: 10). It is then the ‘type’ of sport heroism that is esteemed in the modern world that needs to be discerned (Higgs, 1982), to see whether it is prideful or may lead to unhealthy nationalistic fervor and idolatry.

Perhaps the most important point to glean from this brief discussion of the archetypal modern sports hero is that conceptions of the heroic are wholly dependent on the dominant worldview of any given society.<sup>41</sup> In his incisive and award winning book, *The Denial of Death* (1973: 82), Ernest Becker nicely summarises this in stating, ‘the social hero-system into which we are born marks our paths for our heroism, paths to which we conform [often uncritically], to which we shape ourselves so that we can please others, become what they expect us to be’. Arguably, western culture, especially American, is at present dominated by ‘the religion of the godless celebrity’ (Thompson, 1997: 40), in which the high priests are often Global sports stars. Sports heroes more often than not have become ‘saints’, even ‘gods’ to others (Prebish, 1993) and are objects of worship institutionalised in Sporting Halls of Fame. Without a doubt, ‘the specialist appears to be the man of the hour . . . favourites of today whose appeal consists of one thing (often trivial): pinups and profiles; movie and television stars; . . . the athlete . . . and other splendid performers’, remarks Orrin Klapp in his book *Heroes, Villains, and Fools: The Changing American Character* (1962). Klapp compares modern heroes to the archetypal ‘renaissance man’, those such as Leonardo, Franklin, Churchill and Bacon and bemoans the denigration of the heroic in the modern world.

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Professor Higgs for his advice and guidance as to relevant sources on this topic.

<sup>41</sup> Interestingly, in his book *The Screwtape Letters* (1942), C.S. Lewis identifies the transient and repetitive fashions and ‘ideas and philosophies’ of humans, as a major strategy of the enemy (evil force) in deceiving and blinding humans to the real meaning of life, that is, accepting and living in the grace,

Great men, and heroes of sorts maybe, but let us not forget the most distinguishing characteristic of the heroic is the *sacrificial*, that is, sacrificing your needs, wants, desires, and even life itself, for the good of others.

From the perspective of a Christian believer the ultimate act of heroic sacrifice is when God himself entered the world in the form of His Son Jesus, and ‘humbled Himself and became obedient to death . . . even death on a cross’ (Phil. 2:8), so that we might know his love. Humans, including Christians, can never fully comprehend the magnitude of this heroic sacrifice, or are called to *directly* imitate it. Nonetheless, we are all called to ‘take up their cross and follow him’ (Lk. 9: 23)<sup>42</sup> in every aspect of our life, including sport. C.S. Lewis, in his magical allegorical tale, *The Great Divorce* (2001/1946), provides an illustrative example of the heroic in Christian terms. The writer, in a dream, embarks on a journey into the heavenly spiritual realms. On this voyage he meets a variety of supernatural beings that convey to him how the ‘daily insignificances’ of life have eternal consequences. The story of ‘Sarah Smith’ challenges us to consider how, and why, we classify celebrities and sports stars as great and heroic in the truest sense of the word. The narrative starts with the writer asking his spiritual guide, or teacher as to the identity of ‘one of the great ones’:

‘Is it? . . . is it?’ I whispered to my guide.

‘Not at all,’ said he. ‘It’s someone ye’ll never have

heard of. Her name on Earth was Sarah Smith and she

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love and guidance of an eternal God (Jn. 1:4).

<sup>42</sup> ‘Taking up one’s cross’ can legitimately mean many different things to different people, however Higgs and Braswell’s (2004: 236) proactive statement challenges us to consider what this means: ‘Sports are about chosen ones, those who are able to make the team—the fit, the able, and the talented. All

lived at Golders Green.’

‘She seems to be . . . well, a person of particular importance?’

‘Aye. She is one of the great ones. Ye have heard that fame in this country and fame on Earth are two quite different things.’

‘And who are these gigantic people . . . look! They’re like emeralds . . . who are dancing and throwing flowers before her?’

‘Haven’t ye read your Milton? *A thousand liveried angels lackey her.*’

‘And who are all these young men and women on each side?’

‘They are her sons and daughters.’

‘She must have had a very large family, Sir.’

‘Every young man or boy that met her became her son - even if it was only the boy that brought the meat to her back door. Every girl that met her was her daughter.’

‘Isn’t that a bit hard on their own parents?’

‘No. There *are* those that steal other people’s children.

But her motherhood was of a different kind. Those on whom it fell went back to their natural parents loving them more. Few men looked on her without becoming, in a certain fashion, her lovers. But it was the kind of love that made them not less true, but truer, to their own wives.’

. . . ‘In her they became themselves. And now the abundance of life she has in Christ from the Father flows

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religions at their best are about caring for the unchosen, the rejects, those who don’t qualify for any team’.



over into them.’

I looked at my Teacher in amazement.

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘It is like when you throw a stone into a pool, and the concentric waves spread out further and further. Who knows where it will end? Redeemed humanity is still young, it has hardly come to its full strength. But already there is joy enough in the little finger of a great saint [hero] such as yonder lady to waken all the dead things of the universe into life.’

Of course, Sarah Smith is a hero of a different caste to that we usually see in modern sport, but we cite this analogy in the hope of challenging the reader to examine our distorted conceptions of the heroic, or what Becker (1973: 82-83) calls the ‘standardized hero-game’ that we all blindly play. While it is important to note that ‘taking up one’s cross’ has *deep spiritual meaning*, in sport it is perhaps demonstrating ‘the moral strength to follow the correct path when easier routes are available’ (Birrell, 1981: 368). This is something that would help rectify what Higgs (1982: 154) calls the ‘youthful idolizing of sport heroes and the subsequent disappointment[s]’ that often ensue, when their heroes are caught taking drugs or attacking an opponent. Do we value and even worship sports men and women because of their virtuous actions and character, *as well as* their physical performance and displays of aesthetic beauty? Or is it *primarily* for the winning and results that we transform them into fallible gods and live vicariously through their performances? For those who prize victory above all else, Higgs (1982: 137) suggests ‘the athlete comes back from this mysterious adventure with

the power to bestow boons on his fellow man, that is a sense of identity and self-worth'. As we have argued throughout, realising one's identity principally through sport, as an athlete and perhaps to a lesser degree as a fan or parent, does however often come at a price (see Watson, manuscript submitted).

## **CONCLUSIVE REMARKS**

The aim of this chapter was to reflect theologically on big-business competitive sports, in particular the 'win at all costs' ethic that dominates modern sports. Within a balanced theology of leisure, sport competition can be an immensely positive endeavour for individuals and even a *potential* means of reconciliation and friendship between nations. Too often these ideals are however marred by the sin of pride, which we have argued has a metaphysical source and is the foundational but not exclusive cause of much of the wrong in professional and youth sport. Dr Bud Williams (2004: 18) encapsulates the finely balanced dialectic that exists in sport in stating that sport 'has the potential to bring out the best or worst. It can tempt one to be extremely proud or bring one to the point of humility. It can easily arouse anger and hatred or evoke deep respect and even self-sacrificing love'.

It seems that pride, which as C.S. Lewis advocates is competitive in its essence, has significantly contributed to the 'win at all costs' attitude and concurrently idolatry in modern sport. This is a system we maintain requires 'wholesale spiritual rehabilitation' and a good starting point for change would be the promotion of the virtues such of humility, love, self-sacrifice, respect and honour. At present, however, the evidence

strongly suggests that for many involved in big-time professional sport and children and youth sport (esp. parents and coaches), pride and its frequently damaging consequences hold court. What then is the answer to this dilemma?--as ‘affecting change within the world of big-time, competitive sport . . . is a daunting prospect’ (Mathisen, 2005a), but one it is argued needs urgent attention.

Those in evangelical circles claim that Christians should ‘protest loudly against such abuses’ and seek to reclaim ‘sports to be what God intended them to be’ (Campolo, 1988: 20). To be sure, Jesus’ teachings clearly instruct us to protest against injustices in all aspects of life and work together to redress what is not right, including the moral and ethical problems in sport. In addition to the scholarship and research of pioneers and leading thinkers in the field (Hoffman, 1992; Prebish, 1993; Novak, 1994/1967; Ladd and Mathisen, 1999; Price, 2001; Higgs, 1995; Higgs and Braswell, 2004; Van Andel, Heintzman and Visker, 2005) there are promising signs that individuals and groups are beginning to recognise the widespread damage that is being done within the confines of what is arguably the most popular form of recreation in the western world.

Two new university research centres have recently been established that seek to examine the spiritual and religious dimensions of sport and exercise and provide taught modules on the topic.<sup>43</sup> An academic peer-review journal, the *International Journal of Religion and Sport* (Mercer University Press), has also recently been launched to promote interdisciplinary scholarship and research in the field. Additionally, a diverse group of individuals, comprising theologians, philosophers, sports philosophers, ex-

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<sup>43</sup> See *The Centre for the Study of Sport and Spirituality*, York St John University College, York, England (<http://sportspirituality.yorks.ac.uk>) and the *Centre for Sport, Spirituality and Character Development*,

professional athletes, and sports Chaplains/ministers recently met in Dayton, Ohio, America, for a ‘Think-Tank’ that explored the relationship between sport and Christianity.<sup>44</sup> These relatively new initiatives have however been preceded, with the excellent work of the *Christian Society for Kinesiology and Leisure Studies (CSKLS)*,<sup>45</sup> which is an American organisation that was established in the late 1980s. The CSKLS forum seeks to integrate faith, sport and leisure through the sharing of scholarly work and fellowship, principally through the society’s annual conference. This has resulted in the publication of two books in the field (Van Andel, Heintzman and Visker, 2005; Byl and Visker, 1999) that are comprised of selected papers from past conferences.

New ‘projects’ and writings will no doubt lead to some positive change in sport, as has previous sports ethics research and the excellent work of initiatives such as *The Sports Ethic Institute* and the *Positive Coaching Alliance*. This may especially apply to analysis and change in the structures of sporting institutions, based on the premise that it is ‘impossible to manage the ambiguity of competition at the local face-to-face level unless the ruthless competition at the highest level’ is first addressed (Hull, 2001:273). Nonetheless, any radical and lasting change in the modern sporting arena we maintain will only evolve from the spiritual transformation of the hearts of individual men and women, which begins as Lewis tells us in ‘taking the first step’ of humbling ourselves (1 Pt. 5: 5-6)<sup>46</sup> and acknowledging that sport occupies a number of floors in our

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Neumann College, Philadelphia, US ( <http://www.neumann.edu/academics/special/sscd.asp>).

<sup>44</sup>Think-Tank - *Lord of Sport: A Quest to Discover God’s Wisdom for Sport, March 13-16<sup>th</sup> 2005, Dayton, Ohio* (sponsored and hosted by *Athletes in Action*). The authors of this chapter both attended the meeting alongside a number of leading academics and practitioners who have addressed this important area of study. These include sport philosopher, Professor Scott Kretchmar, Sociology Professor, James Mathisen and Kinesiology Professor Shirl Hoffman, the Executive Director, *Verité Sports* (UK), Stuart Weir, and many other sports ministers and coaches.

<sup>45</sup> See <http://cskls.org>.

<sup>46</sup> Readers should note that this applies to Christians and the ‘The worldwide Church’ (2 Chron. 7: 14-15)

‘Modern Tower of Babel’. ‘If anyone would like to acquire humility, I can, I think, tell him [her] the first step. The first step is to realise that one is proud. And a biggish step, too. At least, nothing whatever can be done before it. If you think you are not conceited, it means you are very conceited indeed’, Lewis (1997/1952: 106) notes.

Philosopher of sport, Mark Hamilton (2003: 8) believes, as we do, that the competitiveness and the pride and shame that is often its life source, ‘reaches into every nook and cranny of our life’, including sport at all levels. Have we so ‘lost our moral compass’ as Hamilton suggests that we are blind to the ‘myth of progress’ that is deeply embedded in postmodern culture.<sup>47</sup> A modern ‘myth of progress’ that has been compared by theologians to the story of the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1-9), the primordial quest to build ‘a city with a tower reaching to the heavens’ (Middleton and Walsh, 1997). There is little doubt that the multi-billion dollar business of sport is a major edifice in this ‘modern Babel’, along with other cultural idols such as scientism, healthism<sup>48</sup> and intellectualism. In the academy, where ‘arid scholasticism, crass

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as well as to those who perhaps have not considered the spiritual life to date.

<sup>47</sup> The ‘myths of progress’ that Middleton and Walsh refer to, come from the disciplines of anthropology (Feuerbach), psychology (Freud), sociology (Marx and Durkheim) and biology (Darwin). Following the ‘Genome project’ in 2000, genetic determinism has arguably become the latest mythic utopia for some. Undisputedly, all these ideas have in varying ways led to very positive scientific, technological, and some social, advancements that we should be most thankful for. However, the point is that the proponents and followers of these utopias have often slid into idolatry, seeing them *all-encompassing* explanations for social and cultural existence and in turn ignoring God’s guidance for how humanity should live. The history of the twentieth century *and the state of the modern world* clearly shows the folly in this view, which we are warned about in the bible (1 Cor. 1: 18-31, 2).

<sup>48</sup> Closely related to the false myth of ‘winning is everything’ in big-time professional sports is our obsessively somatic culture, in which health clubs and gyms have to some degree become the new Church. In his ironically titled book, *Working out My Salvation: The Contemporary Gym and the Promise of "Self" Transformation* (2005, Sydney: Meyer and Meyer Sport), William Hoverd uncovers what he calls a ‘veritable Tower of Babel’ in the sport and Health industries, in which salvation (i.e., identity, recognition and significance) is oft sought through bodily perfection and identification with cultural idols. See also Hoffman (1992, Recovering a Sense of the Sacred in Sports, in Hoffman, S.J. (Ed.), *Sport and Religion*, Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, pp. 153-159) for a similar analysis of what he calls *cultius aerobicus*, that is ‘the horde of Sunday morning joggers . . . who claim to have found on the roads passing by the Church what they could never find within the walls’ (157). For an excellent, very practical and

careerism' and 'pompous posturing' are arguably rampant (Steele, 2000: 90), this manifests itself in the 'publish or perish' ethos that is just as destructive as the 'win at all costs' attitude in modern sport.

At the heart of this modern myth is the belief that humanity can save itself and does not need a saviour in the form of a transcendent God. Prophetic voices, such as Blake, Dostoyevsky, Kierkegaard, Pascal and in the twentieth century, C.S. Lewis and G.K. Chesterton, have all given dire warnings about the modern myth and our prideful and idolatrous quest to create, and to be, our own Gods. Perhaps it is time for those involved in sport, especially those in positions of power and influence to accept that the 'false myths', as Lewis called them, have all proved ineffective in combating the moral and social fragmentation in wider society (Walker, 1996) and sport. False myths that have lead to what social anthropologist, Clifford Geertz (1973: 99), calls the 'gravest sort of anxiety'. A deep anxiety that plagues the young hearts and minds of 'the little boys in grey flannel uniforms' (Campolo, 1988: 126-127) and leads sporting gods like England Rugby Union player Johnny Wilkinson to be 'wracked with anxiety' and feeling 'incredibly depressed, demoralised, even bitter' with *his life* during a long injury lay-off (Jackson, 2006: 50).

What is perhaps most worrying is that for the 'self-sufficient modern' who 'has it all together' and is 'competent' is that this anxiety, or dread, is often buried in the caverns of the mind, an unconscious denial that Kierkegaard (1989/1849: 74) called the 'worst form of despair'. A 'spiritless sense of security' Kierkegaard suggests underlies this

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accessible account of how to keep a balance in both our physical and spiritual health see Hill, D. (2005) *Walking with God: Physically and Spiritually*, Abilene, TX: Coach Book Company.

dread, a despair that will be only uncovered ‘when life begins to quake’ or what Martin Buber (Agassi, 1999) called the ‘shudder of identity’ and the ‘illusion is broken’ then we will see what ‘lies beneath’ (74). As individuals and as a nation(s), are we prepared to peer beneath the corrupt and damaging ‘popular mythology’ (Kohn, 1992) of ‘winning at all costs’ in modern sport. Echoing the thoughts of Kierkegaard, Kohn suggests not, as ‘it would be painful and might force us to make radical changes in our lives, so instead we accept rationalizations’ (114) for the damage that is being done all around us in sport. Perhaps it is these superficial rationalizations that prevent us ‘breaking through the bounds of cultural heroism’ and ‘fictional games being played in . . . society’ (Becker, 1973: 91) and lead to what Kierkegaard called a ‘fictitious health’. The provocative and challenging words of writer, John Eldridge (2001: 90, 150), makes this a little more personal and perhaps uncomfortable for us all:

The world [the western system] offers man a false sense of power and a false sense of security . . . the world cheers the vain search on . . . Be brutally honest now—where does your own sense of power come from? Is it . . . how well [you] play sport? . . . Is it how many people attend your Church? Is it *knowledge*—that you have an expertise and that makes others come to you, bow to you? Is it your position, degree, or title? A white coat, a Ph.D., a podium [?]

Then getting right to the very ‘heart’ of the matter, Eldridge (2001: 150) asks, ‘what happens inside you when I suggest you give it up? Put the book down for a few

moments and consider what you would think of yourself if tomorrow you lost everything that the world has rewarded you for'. For those embedded in the post-modern world of sport, which is constructed from socio-cultural norms and reinforced and manipulated by the mass media, Eldridge's words may be a little too piercing and thus quickly dispatched to the caverns of the mind, and consequently they will continue to 'travel with the carnival' (Middleton and Walsh, 1999: 61). This is the 'Herd mentality' that Kierkegaard wrote extensively on. 'The crowd *is* untruth. It either produces impenitence and irresponsibility or it weakens the individual's sense of responsibility by placing it in a fractional category' (Moore, 1999:243). We do hope however, that all those involved in sport may search their hearts and perhaps consider what C.S. Lewis famously called the 'Deep Magic', 'the Myth that became Fact' (Lewis, 1944: 31)--the story of a God who humbled himself in the most unimaginable way that we might know his love and guidance in every dimension of our lives, including sport.

"But what does it all mean?" asked Susan when they were somewhat calmer. —  
"It means," said Aslan, "that though the Witch knew the Deep Magic, there is a magic deeper still which she did not know. Her knowledge goes back only to the dawn of Time. But if she could have looked a little further back, into the stillness and the darkness before Time dawned, she would have read there a different incantation. She would have known that when a willing victim who had committed no treachery was killed in a traitor's stead, the Table would crack and Death itself would start working backwards." (Lewis, *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*, 2001/1950: 176)



## STUDY QUESTIONS

1. In your experience of playing, officiating or watching sport, consider times when you have witnessed alienation and violence of others. What was the effect on those involved and on you? What does this tell you about modern competitive sport, and *your* values and motivations in sport?
2. In light of the ‘win at all costs’ ethic, discuss the ethical and theological implications of genetic performance enhancement in sport, the topic of an important book by philosopher of sport, Andy Miah (2004).
3. In your own experience of playing or watching sport, consider times when you have experienced or witnessed virtuous actions, i.e. sportsmanship, self-sacrifice, correcting officials’ judgements in favor of the opposition. What was the effect on those involved? How did it make you feel about yourself or others?
4. Theologian, Michael Wittmer (2005), suggests that to think biblically/theologically about sport it would be helpful to use a three-point conceptual framework of *Creation, Fall* and *Redemption*. Adopting one or more of these philosophical start points should help spark group debate and systematic thinking for writing projects on a wide-range of topics. Examples of questions are, what is the nature and meaning of competitive sport? What are the potential

positive and negative outcomes of sport competition? How should Christians involved in sport think and behave? What is God's will for sport?

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

Firstly, I would like to thank my friend and co-author John White, Director of *Athletes in Action* (USA), who provided the original idea and inspiration for this work. In this regard, some small sections of this chapter are taken from a previous publication:

White, J. and Watson, N.J. (2006) 'Exegeting Homo Sportivus', *World of Sports*, 22, 1-2, in press. Secondly, I would like to express my thanks to Scott Kretchmar, Professor of sport philosophy (Penn State University, USA) and Mark Hamilton, Associate Professor of philosophy (Ashland University, USA) for their most helpful comments on our first draft. Thirdly, I would like to thank Kate Hutchings and Dr Chris Bell for their invaluable assistance with proof-reading and the library staff at York St John University, especially Claire McClusky, for help with sourcing literature.

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