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Special Olympians as a 'Prophetic Sign' to the Modern Sporting Babel

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Abstract

Drawing on the work of Jean Vanier, Stanley Hauerwas, Amos Yong and Wolf Wolfsenberger, I will examine how sportspersons with disabilities, especially intellectual disabilities and the 'movement' that represent them, the Special Olympics, are one prophetic sign to the multi-billion dollar business of sport, which it has been argued is a major edifice in the modern 'Tower of Babel', alongside other cultural idols, such as scientism, healthism, intellectualism, unhealthy perfectionism, commercialism and materialism. In an extended conclusion, I identify areas within disability sport that may benefit from further theological reflection and highlight current church and para-church initiatives that seek to raise awareness and affect change in this area. It is my hope that this will encourage scholars and empirical researchers from sports studies and theology alike to take this discussion forward.

KEY WORDS Special Olympics; prophetic sign; disability sport; intellectual disabilities.

INTRODUCTION

> This is after all a time that cries out for the Special Olympics. The world is hungry for what we have. Look around. Everywhere you look, people are hungry for authenticity. Everywhere you look there is a crisis in trust. Everyone is asking: where are the role models of optimism and peace. How can I make a difference and feel a part of something bigger? ... the lesson is clear: we're sports rebels [prophets?] and we need to be sports rebels with spirit and fight forever!
>
> Timothy Shriver, CEO, Special Olympics (2010a, p. 4-6)

> American commercial sports … represent a prominent and aggressive principality—and one might suppose—a more or less innocuous one. Yet the operation of this demonic power has significant *political* importance … markedly similar to that of circuses and athletic spectacles in Imperial Rome.
>
> William Stringfellow (2004/1973, p. 90)

Amidst the generic growth of publications on the relationships between sport and all major world religions, there has been a particular groundswell of academic publications and initiatives on sport and the Christian faith (see Watson & Parker, 2013; Hoffman, 2010). However, a comprehensive review of the literature in the disciplines of 'theology of disability' and 'disability sport' indicates that there is virtually no empirical research or scholarship on the Christian theology of disability sport. Exceptions include, recent essays and empirical work (Brock, 2012; Watson, 2012; Watson & Parker, 2012), doctoral work (Shafer, 2012, pp. 189-196), a short chapter on the uses of leisure and sport in a L'Arche community (O'Keefe, 2006), reflections on the Special Olympics (SO) in Yong's (2007, pp.

114-115) book on the theology of Down Syndrome, a conference presentation (Watts, 2007) and empirical research and essays on women's disability sport from an Islamic perspective (Gaad, 2011, 2006).

The overarching aim of the present article is to begin a discussion on this topic by synthesising ideas and literature from both these areas. While no academic literature exists that has addressed the Christian theological dimensions of disability sport, there are some helpful popular books (e.g., Hoyt & Yaeger, 2010; Molsberry, 2004; Stallings & Cook, 1997) and media sources (e.g., Ironman, 2006) that tell inspirational stories of those with a Christian faith who are involved in disability sport. There is also a significant body of empirical research and scholarship on disability sport from the social sciences that should not be neglected when undertaking theological reflection, in order to contextualize analysis (see Smith & Sparkes, 2012). Issues of embodiment, social exclusion, governance, media and cinematic representations of disability sports and competitive classification of athletes are some of the topics that have been examined.

The on-going debate concerning the classification and inclusion (Howe and Jones, 2006), or not, of athletes with intellectual disabilities (ID) in the Paralympics, is also a controversial topic, not least due to violation of eligibility rights by the Spanish disability (ID) male basketball team at the 2000 Sydney Paralympics, where it was found that 10 out of 12 players did not have an ID (Jobling, Jobling & Fitzgerald, 2008). Generally speaking, it can be argued that the level of media coverage, funding and empirical research on athletes with ID and the events in which they participate and compete, the SO being the most well-known, is far less than for athletes with physical disabilities (PD). There are deeply embedded socio-cultural, historical and theological reasons for this situation that I will explore in more detail. Due to the growing profile of the SO and the recent re-inclusion of athletes with ID in the 2012 London Paralympics and beyond, there is a growing literature in

the sports and leisure disciplines but again, nothing that addresses the religious or spiritual dimension of athletes with ID and the SO.

In addition to literature that provides a summary of the history, governance, nature and issues surrounding the SO movement (Coreen *et al*., 2012), including the SO relation to the Olympics and Paralympics (Brittain, 2010), there is an excellent range of systematic empirical research studies (2004-) and information on programme monitoring and evaluation (see Siperstein, Kersh & Bardon, 2007) published mainly by staff from the *Special Olympics Global Collaborating Centre* (University of Massachusetts, Boston), which are available on the official SO website (see Special Olympics Research Bibliography, 2012). In addition, there is recent peer-review research on ID in sport, which has examined physical activity levels and behaviours of youths (Smith & Sparkes, 2012; Frey, Stanish & Temple, 2008), leisure patterns (Patterson & Pegg, 2009), the motivations of Special Olympians (Farrell et al., 2004) and a national survey exploring the general sporting experience of athletes with ID and their families (Harada & Siperstein, 2009). It is interesting to note at the outset that those studies that explore the motives for participation and long-term adherence, show that although external rewards are of some importance (e.g., medals, winning and the perception of others), the intrinsic motives of fun, friendship and relationships are by far the most important reasons.

This, however, does not mean that Special Olympians are not motivated to excel, win and achieve, as historically there has been a gradual shift toward a more achievement orientated model in the SO movement (Songster *et al*., 1997). This is not dissimilar to the ethos of the Paralympics, that is, "building on and celebrating ability", which Howe (2008: i) suggests, has been the "… politicised raison d'être for [elite] disability sport for more than twenty years …", since the evolution of physical disability sport from rehabilitative and participatory models pre-1960s. Thus, it is crucial to note that irrespective of the presence or

absence of a disability, a major principle of the SO (and Paralympics) has always been that 'athletes are athletes' (Harada and Siperstein, 2009). Notwithstanding some of the commonalities in the motivations and experiences of individual able-bodied and disabled athletes, there are, however, marked differences in the institutional structures and the economic basis of the modern commercialised sport model and the SO. It is, nonetheless, important to acknowledge that the SO movement has not been devoid of criticism in regard to financial issues, claims of segregation, paternalism and the promotion of national corporations and negative disability images that reinforce stereotypes, amongst other things (Storey, 2004; Wolfensberger, 1995; Hourcade, 1989; Brickley, 1984). This does not, however, mean that a legitimate comparison of these institutions cannot be made to highlight the prophetic potential of the SO movement and athletes with intellectual disabilities, a central aim of this essay.

While adding a theological caveat, this follows the work of Howe (2008a: 108), a former paralympic athlete, anthropologist and disability scholar, who suggests that 'paralympians can challenge the prejudices that restrain the impaired in sport and the society it mirrors'. I seek to illustrate how the dominant motivations of athletes in the SO and the movement itself, as described above, are often diametrically opposed to able-bodied professional sport, in which external motivations, such as financial gain, celebrity status and winning-at-all-costs often hold sway (e.g., Hoffman, 2010). Scholars, such as Higgs and Braswell (2004) have even argued that pride of heart in modern professional sports is so encultured that it "... is now synonymous with virtue" (Higgs & Braswell, 2004: 372), as is the case in other institutions, such as media, government and religion. It is hoped that this brief overview of key research and interest areas from the discipline of disability sport is helpful in providing some initial resources to enable reflection upon the multi-facetted nature of disability sport.

To ensure a clear start point to my discussion, it is pertinent to clarify a number of key terms, issues and concepts used. The scope of my deliberations in terms of what 'sport' means will focus mainly, yet not exclusively, on competitive sport. Clifford and Feezel's (1997, p.11), definition of sport is useful: "... a form of play [or should be], a competitive, rule-governed activity that human beings freely choose to engage in". Indeed, participation in sport might ideally include a strong emphasis on fun and play (e.g., Thoennes, 2008) and, in turn, an accurate understanding and application of the etymology of the word 'competition', which renders a sport contest as a 'mutually acceptable quest for excellence' (Hyland, 1988), in which excitement, courage, physical and mental endurance, dedication, aesthetic beauty, and emotional intensity are all possible. This "intense passion", however, also presents the risk that "such intensity will devolve into alienation … violence' (Hyland, 1988, p. 177) and mental and physical harm, for example, through cheating, drug abuse, greed and trash-talk on an individual, team or national level. These commonly recognised elements of corruption will form a major part of my critique of the nature of modern professional sport and how persons with disability, in particular those with ID, arguably can be viewed as one prophetic sign of God's kingdom in the current age.

The aim of this exploratory article is to propose that persons with intellectual disabilities in sport, especially the movement of the Special Olympics, are one incarnational prophetic sign to the multi-billion dollar business of sport, which it has been argued is a major edifice in the modern 'Tower of Babel', alongside other cultural idols such as scientism, healthism, intellectualism, unhealthy perfectionism, commercialism and materialism (Watson & White, 2012). In an extended conclusion, I identify areas within disability sport that may benefit from further theological reflection and highlight the central role of 'relationships' to my proposal.

THEOLOGIES OF DISABILITY AND THE SPORTS WORLD

Following the publication of Nancy Eiesland's now classic book, *The Disabled God* (1994), which focussed solely on physical disability, there has been a growing literature on the theology of PD and ID (e.g., Brock & Swinton, 2012; Yong, 2007; Reinders, 2008; Reynolds, 2008). Predating Eiesland's work, scholarship by Stanley Hauerwas (2004, 1986), Frances Young (2011, 1990) and the founder of L'Arche, Jean Vanier (2009, with Hauerwas) has specifically examined intellectual disability through a Christian lens. This body of empirical research and scholarship has evolved from all the major Christian denominations and numerous disciplines outside of traditional theologies, such as sociology, ethics, education and psychology (Swinton, 2011). There was, of course, theological reflection on disability, more so from the Catholic church (Watts, 2009), prior to the mid-1990s borne out of the disability rights and other civil rights movements of the 1970s but one could argue that this was, and still is, viewed as a 'specialist interest' area. Hauerwas and Vanier (2009, p. 18), however, argue that the biblical themes of weakness, vulnerability, mutuality, hospitality, humility and love are at "... the heart of the gospel", and thus all good theological reflection. Of course, all these gospel values flow from the cross of Christ and as Moltmann (1974, p. 7) notes by drawing on Martin Luther's 'theology of the cross', "the inner criterion of whether or not a theology is *Christian* lies in the crucified Christ ... the Cross is the test of everything" but "to many it sounds unattractive and unmodern".

Perhaps what follows will sound unattractive to those wedded to the win-at-all-costs mentality of modern-day commercialised sport, in which the character traits of humility, weakness and vulnerability (all experienced in the cross) in an athlete's make-up are most often viewed as an 'anathema', suggests consultant sport psychiatrist, Begel (2000). This does not mean that we should not actively seek and experience excellence and joy in sports, the focus of a book by the theologian, Null (2004), but as Martin Luther emphasised, there

are two ways of thinking about God in Christ (McGrath, 1985). These two ways encompass the whole breadth of human experience and salvation, including sport: a *theologia gloriae* (theology of glory, the 'risen Christ') that points to the joy of sport and a *theologia crucis* (theology of the cross, the 'crucified Christ') that emphasizes suffering, humility, dependence and vulnerability in sport.

The reasons for the relative lack of theological reflection on disability are many but as Reynolds (2008, p. 68) states, a major determinant is that theology has been "… taken captive by the cult of normalcy", that is, it has often adopted a starting point rooted in enlightenment philosophies and ideas, especially utilitarianism, rationalism, free-market capitalism, abelism and intellectualism. In thinking about and interacting with those people in society who have disabilities, it may well be that we are also confronted with our own fragilities and weaknesses (bodily and mental) and therefore, disability can 'disturb us' (Yong, 2007). The pervasive influence of Kantian rationality and Platonic-Cartesian dualism in theology (Wilson, 1989) and sport (Twietmeyer, 2008) has also been a factor in de-emphasising and devaluing the role of the body, and able-bodied and disabled sport as a whole, in western culture. Theological reflection on the "... full diversity of experiences of human embodiment" has in turn been sorely lacking in theology (Creamer, 2009, p. 117), until the recent 'body craze' in the discipline, as is the case in the sports studies field since the 1990s due to the central importance of the appearance (i.e., athletic beauty and muscularity) and physical condition of the body in modern sport and exercise contexts (Howe, 2008b; Messner & Sabo, 1990). This focus on the 'body' in academic studies of sport is of course embedded in hegemonic notions of gender, which is in itself a characteristic of institutional structures.

To varying degrees publications on the theology of disability critique the socio-cultural structures and institutions that marginalise, alienate, oppress and devalue the

disabled, principally because, "… we are creatures that fear difference" (Hauerwas, 2004, p. 40). To be sure, disability sport scholars following the foundational work of the Marxist sociologist, Oliver (2009/1996, 1990), mainly advocating the social constructivist model of disability, have analysed how access, provision of facilities in schools and communities, funding, media and cinematic representations and the overall status and perceived importance of disability sports, is hugely different to able-bodied sport, for example, the Olympic Games (Thomas & Smith, 2009; Howe, 2008a). A particularly thorough and nuanced analysis of negative and ungodly socio-cultural structures is presented by Reynolds (2008, pp. 56-70), who discusses the 'Economics of Exchange' that fuel the 'Cult of Normalcy' and ultimately configure the lens through which moderns view the disabled:

> Consciousness of worth is something that transpires according to what I call an '*economy of exchange'*, a system of reciprocity that regulates interactions in a community ... The attribution of worth never occurs in isolated form as an individual's thought process, but rather within a complex set of social arrangements and reciprocal relationships that distribute, and appraise values ... Bodily practices form the supportive scaffolding ... this point is not trivial. Our bodies always negotiate social space by participating in an exchange of goods, whether going to school, playing on a sports team, working ... Each social context – school, sports, employment, family, and friendship – involves its own performance expectations and criteria of value measurement ... Physical appearance is probably the most obvious marker ... A social identity is written on the body ... Economics of exchange, therefore, revolve around identification markers that display what I call *body capital* ... All kinds of cultural productions are involved, such as beauty, athleticism and intelligence ... The body is an icon representing the effects of power ... cast in the form of the dominant culture's sense of the good.

The dominant culture of our age borne from the enlightenment modernist principles of individuality, self-sufficiency, materialism, rationalism, free-market capitalism and power, then encourage a 'cult of normalcy' that "... tells people with disabilities who they are, forcing them by various societal rituals to bear a name that is depersonalizing', and this leads to 'alienation, both socially and personally" (Reynolds, 2008, p. 62). This dangerous 'Tyranny of Normality', as Hauerwas (2004) has called it, so grips our culture that we are often in denial to its existence, preferring to suppress our own fears and insecurities and thus maintain the status quo. This unconscious denial is what Kierkegaard (1989/1849:74) called a 'spiritless sense of security', a 'fictitious health' that, in-part, maintains itself through the legion of principalities and powers, that is, evil spiritual forces (Luke 8:29-33; Gal. 4:3; Eph. 1:21; 6:12; Col 1:15-16; 2:15) that govern (are behind) many of the ungodly and idolatrous institutions of our society (Brueggemann, 2010), including sport and the Olympic Games (Watson, 2012; Watson & Parker, 2012; Stringfellow, 1973/2004). This empirical reality has been evidenced in a burgeoning sports ethics, and fast-developing theology of sport literature.

Theologically, the 'Tyranny of Normality' that characterises the modern psyche must be rejected in light of the biblical concept of *imago Dei*, that is, that we are all in essence (our spiritual nature) made in the image of God and are equal (Gen. 1: 27). Niebuhr (1943, p. 32) conveys this in stating that it "is the assurance that because I am, I am valued, and because you are, you are beloved, and because whatever is has being, therefore is worthy of love". Developing the notion that those with ID in sport (and other aspects of life) are commonly devalued and marginalised, raises the possibility that such people might be considered, at least to some degree, to be prophets to the sporting Babel of our age. For biblical scholars, suggesting athletes with intellectual disabilities and the movement that represents them, the Special Olympics, is an incarnational prophetic message (i.e., sign/action) may be controversial.

A traditional exegesis, would likely assert that prophetic signs/actions "… nearly always embody a "divine" revelation . . . The actions, in other words are contrived to reveal what God is saying to his people", according to McKnight (2000, p. 206; also see Overholt, 1983). McKnight defines a 'prophetic action as an act performed by a prophet that is (1) intentional, (2) conventional—as opposed to a spontaneous, natural action, and (3) designed specifically to embody God's purposes and the mission/message of the prophet to his people-audience' (221). Further to this, in explaining the challenges of 'classifying' prophetic actions recorded in the biblical canon, due to their diversity, he cites the work of Hooker (1997):

> Perhaps it would be better to speak, on the one hand, of prophetic actions which meditate manifestations of divine power in events that bring with them either salvation or judgements, and on the other, of prophetic actions which point to a divine activity which cannot otherwise be observed in the present.

Kirkpatrick (2000) makes the point that the concept of 'embodiment' is crucial in both these interpretations of prophetic actions/signs, and that the second is an expression of God's will in the world. For example, he uses the story of Jesus sitting at the table (partying) with sinners, as an incarnational prophetic act to those in that particular socio-historical setting (also see Prévost, 2004). Based on this line of reasoning, could it then be that the very existence of the Special Olympics movement and the 'presence' of individual Special Olympians are *one* prophetic sign to the professional win-at-all-costs culture of modern sport (another particular socio-historical setting); and to a lesser degree the Church at large? Considering that McKnight goes on to emphasise the lack of uniformity in prophetic signs and actions, due to the extremely diverse missions of prophets, perhaps, as theologian, Shafer (2012, p. 195) advocates, this is a viable thesis and one which I develop:

> They [Special Olympians] are messengers calling us to refocus the motivations of our athletic endeavours from attempting to surpass humanity's physical limitations to embracing those limits which unite us . . . Rather than seeing sport as a never ending quest for the expansion of human abilities Christian theology challenges us to appreciate the activity itself as an expression of our common nature and finitude.

Following this line of thinking, it is interesting that Kirkpatrick (1897, pp. 332-333), in analysing the prophetic ministry of old testament prophet, Ezekiel, who at times, conveyed his message through bizarre prophetic actions/signs, states that "the very strangeness, and it may even be foolishness [see 1 Corinthians. 1:27-29], of a sign, may have served to attract attention of those who would have been indifferent to the prophet's words". As Swinton (2009, p. 16, cited in Hauerwas & Vanier) has intimated, central to much theological work on disability, is the biblical mandate that the "...weakest, and least presentable people are indispensable to the Church" (1 Corinthians 12:22), and I would add the sports realm.

ATHLETES WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES AND THE SPECIAL OLYMPIC MOVEMENT: A PROPHETIC SIGN?

Over the years, theologians have to varying degrees suggested that persons with disabilities, in particular ID, are a prophetic sign to the age of modernity and the present era that exalts self, celebrity, wealth, outward beauty, the intellect, success and the need to be perfect in all that we do (Brock, 2011; Harshaw, 2010). These cultural values reflect what we think about ourselves, who we are – our identity and self-worth – and thus how we think and act towards those who do not exhibit these qualities. The controversial figure of Wolf Wolfensberger who is perhaps most well-known for the concept of 'normalization' that he advocates in mainstream disability studies and the SO (Wolfensberger, 1995, 1972) and which Oliver (2009/1996) has strongly critiqued, has been a major proponent of the idea that

those with ID carry a prophetic message. Responses to his work reflect those received by the Old Testament prophets (and Jesus: see McNight, 2000), who attempted to call the nation of Israel to repentance over its idolatry. As the modern system of competitive sport is arguably an 'idol factory' in which athletes, fans, coaches and parents have a "... misplaced trust ... false worship in something other than God" (White, 2008, p.127), Wolfensberger's ideas are applicable here. Some of Wolfensberger's (2001a,b) reasons for interpreting those with ID as a 'Prophetic Voice and Presence ... in the World Today' that link to the sports world are discussed below.

People with ID (and PD) are much more public and visible, which is reflected in the sports community, with the birth and development of the Special Olympics (1968-) that is "… the world's largest organization for people with intellectual disabilities" (Siperstein, Kersh & Bardon, 2007, p. 1) and is a global movement that serves over 4 million Special Olympic athletes [children from 8yrs old and adults] and their families in over 175 countries (Special Olympics, 2013). The SO have evolved from a 'nice' sport organization for persons with Down syndrome, into a global 'movement' that champions the cause and dignity of those with intellectual disabilities, suggests Timothy Shriver, the CEO since 1996 (Shriver, 2010a). It is worth noting that the SO is understood as a 'movement'. Harshaw (2010, p. 316) notes that all those who have advocated that those with ID are a prophetic sign to the modern world, Jean Vanier, Wolf Wolfsenberger and Amos Yong, do so in plurality, "advancing the idea that the most important aspect of their prophetic activity centres on the role that they hold in common …". The SO has more than 805,000 volunteers, 244,000 coaches, 500,000 officials, and organises 44,136 international and regional competitions around the globe each year (Brittain, 2010; Shriver, 2010a). The SO Summer Games were held in Athens, 2011, and 7,500 SO athletes from 185 nations competed in 22 Olympic-type sports. Increasing visibility of athletes with ID is also shown in the organisation of the first

SO Global Congress (Marrakech, Morrocco, 2010), at which SO leaders from around the world developed the 2011-2015 strategic plan of what Shriver (2010a: 2), calls a 'civil rights movement of the heart—powered by sport'. Similarly, athletes with PD now have high media visibility. There were 4,200 athletes from 150 nations participating in 480 events in the London 2012 Paralympics.

People with ID (and PD) are internationally recognised, following the civil and disability rights movement, subsequent changes in legislation of the 1960-70s and the rise of 'normalisation' and 'social role valorisation' theories (Wolfsenberger, 1972). Again, this is mirrored in the birth of the Paralympic Games (1960, Rome) and the SO (1968, Chicago), which has led to the exponential growth of disability sports provision, global public awareness through increased media- coverage (Thomas & Smith, 2009) and government and corporate funding. Under the leadership of Shriver, the SO have undoubtedly also seen exponential growth and international recognition, not unlike the L'Arche movement that has, Wolfsenberger (2001a, p. 18) argues, "... unequivocally gained international visibility".

Further evidence is provided by the fact that some disabled—note they are only physically disabled—have attained 'celebrity status', for example, British paralympian, Dame Tanni Grey-Thompson (Howe & Parker, 2012), Oscar Pistorius (known as 'blade runner' in the media), Mark Zupan, one of the main characters of the documentary, *Murderball* (Gard & Fitzgerald, 2008) and Ade Adepitan MBE, a wheelchair basketball paralympian and well-known UK television presenter. Of course, these are not in the same sphere as current able-bodied demi-gods, such Tiger Woods (until recently), Roger Federer and Lionel Messi. Brittain (2010, p. 19), inadvertently, summarises the first two dimensions of Wolfensberger's thesis I have selected and applied to sport, by stating that:

> International disability sport has come an amazingly long way since its early beginnings as a rehabilitative tool at a hospital in England over sixty years ago. It has developed into a huge international mega-event that has done a great deal to raise awareness of what people with disabilities are capable of and is increasingly making disability sport and athletes with disabilities an important visible part of the international sporting calendar.

Non-Disabled and Disabled Persons are sharing their lives, often living together. This is personified in L'Arche communities where those with disabilities (especially ID) 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 (Harshaw, 2010), agrees in principle with Wolfensberger that "... people with handicaps are prophetic" (Vanier, 1995, p. 114). Disability sport organisations and events, for example, the SO 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 Farrell et al's (2004, pp. 160, 164) study of motivations for athletes participation in the SO, 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".

People with ID may be Parodying Intellectualism. Since the European enlightenment arid intellectualism has slowly pervaded our culture. Not in any way to decry the intellect itself, the university or education and research, but it is a well-known maxim that academics often 'talk to themselves' and operate in a 'publish or perish' ethos that is characterized by "… arid scholasticism, crass careerism" and "pompous posturing" (Steele, 2000, p. 90), that is just as destructive as the 'win at all costs' sporting attitude. Wolfensberger (2001a: 27) in

line with numerous biblical themes that parody the fallible wisdom and intelligence of humans, in relation to Gods wisdom (e.g., 1 Corinthians 1: 17-31; 2: 1-16) provides a critique:

> ... many of the behaviours emitted by ... [disabled] ... people irritate and aggravate bright people, and that some of these behaviours may constitute a parodying of some of the intellectualisms of a culture that elevates the intellect and secular achievement to an extreme. Such parodying would not be malicious, but an innocent acting out of God's derision, so to speak, at our efforts to build intellectual towers of Babel.

God's derision? Is not the multi-billion dollar business of sport, with its financial corruption, boasting and exaltation of human ability and strength, celebrity status and bodily beauty, a focus of God's derision? There is a 'strange logic of Christian witness', Reynolds (2008, p. 19) suggests, in that "… the Christological implications of Paul's paradoxical proclamation 2 Corinthians 12: 9-10; namely …" that "… the saving power of God is made manifest and perfected in weakness or the lack of ability … a strength that comes through weakness, or wholeness that manifests itself in brokenness, a power that reveals itself through vulnerability". While beyond the scope of this study, it is worth noting the clear links here to conceptions of the 'Holy Fool' (for Christ, 1 Corinthians 4: 10) and 'Holy Folly' within the Russian Christian tradition of the fourteenth and sixteenth century, desert monasticism and the writings of Dostoevsky (Phan, 2001), in which persons that were feeble-minded, vulnerable, weak and idiotic in the eyes of the world, "unconventionally … might be a mouthpiece of the Holy Spirit" (Trevett, 2009, p. 137). Perhaps then, athletes with ID do have a powerful embodied prophetic message for the modern sporting realm.

Disabled People are Gentling Others, through their vulnerability, weakness and presence. This, I would argue, is Wolfsenberger's most pertinent point for the sports world.

It is suggested that those with ID have a 'gentling' influence on others, making them more compassionate, patient and tender in relationships. Yong (2007, p. 221) calls this a humanizing influence on others, through which we 'meet' with the vulnerability and brokenness of others. Similarly, Timothy Shriver (2010b, p. 1), in recounting one of many stories from the SO, 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. Gabriel Marcel's notion of 'presence' and Martin Buber's Hasidic teaching of 'hallowing the everyday' and 'healing through meeting', in an 'encounter' with the other, is useful for understanding this relational mutuality in sport from a Judea-Christian standpoint (Watson, 2006).

In sport, the story of Gene Stallings, a highly competitive professional American football coach (and practicing Christian) who has a son with Down syndrome, provides a good example. Through his relationship with his son, Stallings quickly realised that he "... was becoming more tolerant, more compassionate, and it was carrying over into work [professional sport coaching]" (Stallings & Cook, 1997, p. 66). This is supported by research that has explored *The Positive Contributions of the Special Olympics on the Family* (Kersh and Siperstein, 2010, p. 4), which showed 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 ID. I also have experienced something of this in my 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 Yong (2007, p. 189) calls a "spiritual antennae" that is not determined by intellectual capacity (1 Cor. 1: 18-31; of course this spiritual sensitivity—the 'spiritual antennae'—is not unique to persons with intellectual disabilities). In their vulnerability and transparency (e.g., hugging others) 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. It is interesting to note, that in the tradition of the SO, each athlete is not only given a medal but also ‘a hug’ after competing, something that Storey (2004) has questioned because it may encourage ‘inappropriate social behaviour’ with strangers.

As described in the preceding section, able-bodied competitive sport is generally characterized by ‘being the best, ‘winning-at-all-costs’ through a physical and/or psychological domination of your opponent. Sports media perpetrate these notions claiming, “You don’t win silver, you lose gold” (Nike ad), and “Nice guys finish last ... every time you lose you die a little” (Kohn, 1992, p. 118). This understanding of modern sport is supported by Begel (2000, pp. xiv-xvi), who illustrates how thoughts of humility, weakness and vulnerability are diametrically opposed to the identity of athletes:

> If there is any character trait that is anathema to an athlete it is that of weakness. Being unable to handle one’s feelings, and confessing that inability to another human being in intimate conversation, is not usually concordant with an athlete’s sense of mastery ... the role of professional athlete may increase the risk of suffering a specific narcissistic vulnerability, and retirement from sports at any level carries with it an increased risk of clinical depression, especially if the retirement is forced by injury, or waning abilities ... .

This risk of depression is fundamentally tied to the athlete’s sense of identity, an idolatrous trust and hope in the vehicle of sport instead of God to provide life meaning (Watson, 2011). When this is taken away a ‘symbolic death’ occurs in the heart of the athlete and they experience what the Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber, called a ‘shudder of identity’ (Katz, 1975). On retiring from sport, Dean Macey, British Olympic decathlete, clearly

articulated this: ‘Fourth in the Olympics hurt, but retirement is like a death in the family ... I’d lost a major part of my life, something was dead. Everything I’d lived for was over’ (Slot, 2008, p. 98). This is a description of what sport psychologists call the ‘hero-to-zero’ syndrome. More often than not an athlete’s sense of identity is based on culturally bound hegemonic definitions of masculinity and femininity (the gendered body) that are linked to demonstrations of power, performance and bodily beauty and muscularity (e.g., Messner & Sabo, 1990; Hargreaves, 1994), as is also the case in some physical disability sports (Hardin and Hardin, 2005; Gard & Fitzgerald, 2008). Indeed, as Weiss (2007, p. 107) notes, ‘this glorification of the physical body has had implications for the devaluation of the disabled body’.

In their analysis of constructions of masculinity and disability in recent movies that have a Christian subtext, that is, a battle between good and evil, such as the *Superman* films, Koosed and Schumm (2009) discuss the concept of a ‘Super Jesus’, (i.e., a Superman character, such as the late Christopher Reeve) and how this ‘American ideal’ rooted in the Protestant work ethic shapes modern understandings of Jesus: a ‘Super Jesus’. Similarly, some Christians (especially Protestants) involved in modern sport have pedalled a utilitarian ‘winning a championship for Christ’ mentality (Hoffman, 2010) that often values and adopts the values of sports culture, in which pride is erroneously oft understood as virtue, due to the process of enculturation. Watson (2012) has argued that those who adopt this approach to sport and view Jesus as a competitive ‘super-hero’ or ‘team-mate’, should consider the message of Isaiah 53 and Philippians 2:1-11 and adopt a less utilitarian and more playful approach to sport, while still pursuing excellence (see Null, 2004). Perhaps by adopting St. Francis’ maxim, ‘preach the gospel ... and when necessary use words’, so that the witness of their lives would bear fruit, rather than always trying to exalt Jesus through winning for him. He does not need us to be the most ‘winningest’ athlete or coach, to advance His kingdom.

The Christian story teaches that God's kingdom advances through human beings first accepting his extravagant offer of grace and salvation and then following the author of salvation, Jesus Christ, in all aspects of their lives. Winning in any aspect of life, including sport, is not a prerequisite. When Pontius Pilate asked Jesus if He was the King of Jews, Jesus replied "You are right in saying I am a King' but 'My Kingdom is not of this world" (John 18: 33-39). The values of God's kingdom, unselfishness, humility, sacrificial love, patience, kindness, peace, long-suffering, righteousness and moral purity are seldom observed in modern culture and the microcosm of sport. "I tell you the truth", Jesus says, "… many who are first will be last, and the last first" (Mark 10: 29, 31). Herein lies the rationale for examining narratives of disability sport from a Christian perspective, to uncover any hidden prophetic message.

In summary, it is predictable that there are many dissenters of Wolfensberger's polemical ideas and his contention that Satan (i.e., demonic forces) is involved in some part in people's disablements and worldly affairs. I would concur with Yong (2007, pp. 221-222), however, that Wolfensberger calls "... into question our taken-for-granted assumptions of "normalcy" in exclusive ways" and that his argument "... has to do with Paul's claim that God confounds the wisdom of the world with what the world considers foolishness".

> … 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)

This is not to suggest that persons with ID are in any way foolish but as Yong (2007, p. 221) goes on to say that "... their lives embody the wisdom of God in ways that interrogate, critique, and undermine the status quo". Thus, Wolfensberger's thesis is an excellent foundation to critique and theologically deconstruct the win-at-all-costs culture of sport. An important point to stress at this juncture, is that while we can learn much about the heart of Jesus from relating to those with disabilities, and we can, with strong biblical justification, view them as prophets to this age, we must never see them as 'objects' of ministry, or as a means of developing virtuous character traits in ourselves. As Professor Michael Bérubé (2010, p. 48) notes in reflecting on his relationship with his son, who has Down syndrome and loves competitive sport, "... I've long since grown immune to clichés about children with Down syndrome. Jamie is not an angel sent to humanise the rest of us; not a sweet dollop of smiles and passivity. He is an ordinary human being, full of passions and desires that are … admirable". Following this, any utilitarian, self-pitying and hierarchical mind-set must be avoided and we must view all persons with disabilities as equals in relationships of mutuality, where both the non-disabled and disabled have something to offer and receive as a gift, for example, time, presence and sacrificial love.

CONCLUDING REMARKS AND FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS

The aim of this article was to provide evidence that sportspeople with ID and the global organisation that represents them, the Special Olympics, is one prophetic sign, not a panacea, to the modern professional sporting institution that is an idol for many athletes, fans and coaches. It is important to re-emphasize that of course there are many individuals in amateur and professional competitive sport (able-bodied and disabled) that play free from the sinful bondage of selfishness, narcissism, alienating others, pride-fully seeking self-glorification and status. Indeed, due to the critical tenor of my study some readers may think

that I am demonizing all elite able-bodied sportspeople. On the contrary, I strongly support Smart (2005, pp. 198-199) who states that regardless of celebrity status of our sports stars:

> ... the achievements of high profile professional sporting figures possess a quality that is increasingly rare in a world made cynical (corruption in sport) ... the excitement and emotion aroused by the uncertainty of sporting encounters ... the pleasure derived, and frequently collectively shared ... as a spectator or viewer.

Sports are good, or perhaps more accurately have the potential to be. I am in agreement with the spiritual writer, Brennan Manning (2005, p. 104), who acknowledges that due to their own insecurities and need to feel good about themselves, some "… hypercritical Christians quickly deny the presence of any value anywhere and overemphasize the dark and ugly aspects of a person, situation, or institution at the expense of their noble and valuable facets". But when gazing through a Christian theological lens, it can be argued that much of the idolatrous institution of sport built on free-market capitalist and enlightenment principles (Guttman, 1994), is shot through with sin and corruption and is in need of spiritual renewal. On this note, I am of the same opinion as the Special Olympics CEO, Timothy Shriver (2010a, p. 6), who urges that:

> … we need to get even more serious about sharing the gifts of our athletes with the world. To do so, we need to fight harder to get attention for our story while we are confronting the most persistent and stubborn prejudice against our athlete.

The general vision of the SO is to "… transform communities by inspiring people throughout the world to open their minds, accept and include people with intellectual disabilities and thereby celebrate the similarities common to all people" (Brittain, 2010, p. 147). This is a noble and worthy vision and yet limited. Encouragingly, however, in his opening address of the 2010 SO Global Congress, Shriver seems to extend this vision to the

heart and perhaps the spiritual message of the SO: “We’re not leading a program; We’re leading a movement – some say a civil rights movement of the heart—powered by sport” (2). It would seem that Shriver as a catholic Christian is referring to the biblical teaching, that the “heart … is the wellspring of life” and therefore, healthy relationships (Pv. 4: 23; Mk. 12: 28-31).

Authentic loving relationships are at the heart of the gospel and Jesus ministry to all, including the disabled. It is through Jesus’ relationships that he ministered God’s love and grace to the world and prophetically spoke into people’s hearts, for example, the Samaritan woman at the well (Jn. 4:7-26) and the healing of the disabled man at the pool of Bethesda (Jn. 5:1-15). Most writings on the theology of disability give significant space to relational concepts, such as friendship, mutuality, hospitality, vulnerability, humility and giving and receiving love. However, interpersonal relationships in sport settings, remains largely ‘unexplored territory’ (Jowett & Wylleman, 2006). In this regard, Jean Vanier (cited in Reimer, 2009, p. 53) the founder of L’Arche, suggests that we need to “... rediscover what is essential: Committed relationships, openness and the acceptance of weakness in a ‘world of competition’”, if we are to understand the prophetic message of persons with ID, which includes athletes with ID and the SO. As O’Keefe (2006, p. 113) found in her study of the use of leisure and sport in L’Arche, leisure can be used to foster community and “the Christian focus of love in L’Arche is to announce the ridiculous—that we NEED them to teach us to trust, laugh easily, live more in the moment, enjoy the presence of others, and accept one another unconditionally”. Indeed, sharing and celebrating life and relationships is a central motif of L’Arche, which maps closely to the experience of athletes at the SO (Corman, 2003). Why has the sports world largely neglected the importance of relationships and how can a Christian understanding of athletes with ID speak into this situation?

Due to the continued secularization and scientization of sport since the evolution of 'institutionalized' professional sport in the 1960's and the resultant win-at-all-costs ethic (Beamish & Ritchie 2006), I would argue that relationships and especially the discussion of relational dynamics, such as love, humility and vulnerability have not been on the agenda. In Swinton and Brock's (2007, p. 18) theological analysis of genetic science and its effect on the disabled, they were "... struck by the lack of a rhetoric of love", as I am in the scientized sports world. In light of the fact that genetic performance enhancement technologies were identified as a "... potential threat to the London 2012 Olympics" (House of Commons, 2007: 40) and secular analyses of genetic science in sport have pedalled trans-humanist ideas (e.g., Miah, 2004), I strongly support Trothen's (2011) contention that scholars need to adopt a 'Relational theological Ethic' rooted in Mark 12:28-31, and sound biblical anthropology when theologizing on both able-bodied and disabled sport.

Also, of vital importance to all theological writing, research and praxis in the area of disability sport is to reflect on all the key theological themes and doctrines, that is, the biblical narrative as a whole. For example the Creation narrative has been often 'glossed over' in disability research and yet these narratives are "... crucial to understand the creation as the context of human love, this being part of a matrix of other theological themes, such as the nature of God, revelation, covenant, providence, salvation, and so on" (Reynolds, 2008, p. 138). Ontologically, if we are created then we are also dependent (on God and others), which rejects the modern mantra of individualism and self-actualization that characterizes modern sports (Swinton, 2011; Watson, 2011). As Moltmann (1998, p. 121) intimates; "a person with disabilities gives others the precious insight into the woundedness and weakness of human life", and I would add, the heart of Jesus for the world of sport (e.g., Watson & Parker, 2012).

Recently, however, there has been promising signs that the acknowledgement and inclusion of the disabled in the sports world is on the radar of the world church (see Cornick, 2012). This is demonstrated in the publication of a 'paralympic prayer' by the Church of England Liturgical Commission, prior to the London 2012 Paralympic games (Cole, 2012), and a 'Courage and Faith' opening service for the paralympics, held in St Paul's Cathedral, London (17 August), which included a game of 3-on-3 wheelchair basketball under the cathedral's famous dome (Boulding, 2012). Another example is the Catholic Bishops of England and Wales appointing James Parker, the *Catholic Executive Coordinator* for the London 2012 Games, who, with Christiana Gangemi (Co-Director, *Kairos Forum*, University of Aberdeen), assisted in organizing an 'international conference on the theology of physical and intellectual disability/paralympic sport' in 2012 (Everybody Has a Place, 2012). Additionally, in support of the recent United Nations *Treaty of Rights for the Disabled* (2006, cited in Howe, 2008a, p. 1) that highlighted the importance of increased access and provision of sport and leisure activities for those with disabilities (article 30), let us hope that as the L'Arche worldwide network of communities and the Vatican's 'Church and Sport' office, may consider helping to develop more sport and leisure provision for those with ID. For empirical researchers seeking to explore the role of sport and recreation in L'Arche communities, the theological ethnographies of Reimer (2009) and Webb-Mitchell (1993), disability sport research of Howe (2008a) and methodological reflections of Ward (2011b), Macbeth (2010) and Swinton and Mowat (2006) are helpful resources, with many methodological insights and powerful interview narratives.

In conclusion, there is a real need for further empirical research and scholarship on the theology of intellectual and physical disability sport and, most importantly, change in practice and legislation of sport (Macbeth, 2010). An important caveat though is that while "disability rights are important" in so far "as they relate to the coming of the kingdom …

rights without love won't work" (Swinton, 2011: 305). What is required is a radical vulnerability of heart from those involved in sport, a heart that will be open to 'hear and see' the beauty and prophetic message of those with intellectual disabilities, whilst also acting to bring liberation and sense of true 'belonging' (see Swinton, 2012; Reason, 2012) within the political and institutional structures that they inhabit.

This study has focussed on athletes with ID and the Special Olympics. However, following the recent craze of 'body studies' across the disciplines, including the sociology and philosophy of sport (e.g., Howe, 2008b; Schilling, 2003), research synthesising this literature with Eiesland's (1994`) embodiment theology of the 'disabled God' and subsequent developments and alternatives of this idea (Swinton, 2011; Creamer, 2009, Yong, 2007; Reynolds, 2008; Reinders, 2008; Monteith, 2005; Hull, 2003), will be one important area of enquiry. Perhaps the question that this study has posed is best summed up by Swinton and Brock (2007:, p. 241), who ask, "What does their coming among us require of us?":

> 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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