

Newsletter **September 2011**

God and sport

From the Director and Canon Theologian



Sport is such an important area of many people's lives, but we don't often think about it and God in the same breath – or to put it another way: we don't tend to think theologically about sport. I believe we can and should learn to think theologically about everything. WIT here presents some brief reflections to give us something to ponder while we watch (or maybe don't watch) the Rugby World Cup.

Some sporting activities are for individuals, others are for teams. Bishop Tom (our player/coach?) reflects on the community aspects of rugby, on and off the field. Winton Davies wonders where God fits in to sport and reminds us of the athletic metaphors used by St Paul. The New Testament letters reflect the highly individual nature of the surrounding Greek culture. Individual sport is about being the best, about running to win the race, and for this to happen we need both to delight in what we're doing and to work at it – and often have some good luck as well. We have to put it a lot of individual effort, physical and mental, and preparation is important.

I know this from running: if you want to reach the goal, you have to prepare for it, put in the training – work at it, and find the delight. You don't just get up one morning and decide to run a half marathon – you have to build up your distances, and stamina, and this doesn't happen by accident. Now to cross over from sport to our faith: if our goal is a closer relationship with God, how do we work at that? How do we 'train' for that? Or do we just leave it to chance, or think that it will happen of its own accord?

Those who've engaged in any sort of sport, whether on their own or as part of a team, soon learn that what you take into your body affects the effort it can produce. You have to watch what you eat and drink: the right balance of foods, not too much alcohol, not smoking. To switch over again from sport to faith: what is it, then, that we feed our spirits on? Are we nurturing our souls – by prayer, by reading the Scriptures, by reading and reflecting on faith issues in other ways? Are we filling our minds with the intellectual or spiritual equivalent of 'junk food'?

Lyll Perris asks some searching questions about professionalism, body-contact, the place of fun, and where competitiveness fits in with our being made in the image of God. That last issue is one I'm going to think on some more. But for those who want some light relief if their favourite team doesn't do too well in the Rugby World Cup (and in a Three Tikanga church we might not all be supporting the All Blacks), there's always that song 'Drop-kick me Jesus through the goal posts of life'. Go on, google the lyrics. You know you want to.

Canon Deborah Broome

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WIT library subscriptions were due on 15 September. Payment will be happily accepted at Synod.

Rugby evokes passions among so many of our people

For me, rugby is like going to church. It has been part of who I am for about as long as I can remember. I started playing rugby when I was five years old, which is about the time of my first memories of going to church. My first game was exciting, although at first I got a bit confused and thought it was a game of forwards versus the backs! Once I got that straight, things improved, and by the age of seven I had scored my first try. The try itself was not that brilliant: I just happened to be nearest to the ball when it rolled over the line, but it is there lasered into my childhood memory. Playing for my high school first XV was also a high point, especially when we went through the season undefeated, a feat not achieved before or since. In adult life however, my participation has been that of a spectator [quite noisy at times] and an armchair selector.

It was after I had been ordained and had gone to serve in an English parish, in the diocese of Leicester, that I began an STh thesis on the theology of leisure. Not that power-scrummaging is that leisurely or seemingly theological, but it was interesting to ask questions about why we play sport including rugby.

It is encouraging that in this day and age, when the emphasis has been on individualism, a team sport not only survives but is so popular not just with the players but with a wider public of spectators. Perhaps it is a way for people to compensate for the emphasis placed on the individual and to find a way to be communally involved?

Rugby is a team sport, but that doesn't mean the gifts of an individual are forgotten. We note the individual brilliance of the Dan Carters and the Richie McCaws. However, teams that don't do well as teams generally lose. So, the value of being as one is affirmed.



Another value is the celebratory nature of a game of rugby. From the anticipation of what might happen, to the flow of the game [on a good day], to the joy of a win. Even a loss can evoke a degree of celebration even if closer in nature to that of a wake.

And while experiencing community and enjoying a celebration are divinely-inspired gifts another could be the 'permission' the game provides for the release of energy. The players clearly spend lots of energy, but so do the spectators, and better we do that with rugby than in violence, abuse and riots.

The Rugby World Cup promises celebration on a grand scale: a win for New Zealand and the party will be heard through-out the galaxy; a loss will mean a national month of mourning. Like it or hate it, the spectacle will provide time out for earthquake-shaken communities, and those who struggle to make ends meet. It won't cure anything but it offers a chance to incorporate oneself in the crowd with others who like us will want our team to prevail.

**+Tom
Bishop of Wellington**

Apocalypse Now and Then

WIT seminars on Revelation

Saturday 15 October St Peter's Church, Palmerston North

Saturday 29 October St Mark's Church, Carterton

Saturday 5 November WIT Library, Anglican Centre, Wellington

Seminars will run 10:00 am – 3:00 pm. BYO lunch.



Where is God in sport?

An American visitor to our house in July remarked that “New Zealand more than punched her weight in international sport”. For the size of our nation and its small population New Zealand does excel in a multitude of international sports.

The countdown is now over for the Rugby World Cup – the William Webb Ellis Trophy - and 19 visiting nations and New Zealand, the host, are competing.

Where does God fit in to what some see as our fanaticism and even religious zeal for rugby, netball etc? Whose side is God on?

Where is God?

I rather think God is neutral. God is interested in every facet of life - interested in the players, coaches, spectators, referees and couch potatoes; and the way we host our overseas visitors and teams.

sportsmanship may be the key word when we consider God and sport. God is on the side of the neutral referees/umpires/judges (provided they are fair). That is, to see the players abide by the rules and keep to the spirit of the game. A Christian should play fairly, yes aggressively, and to win, but not use dirty tactics, or cheat. Sport is a game to be played and enjoyed, and to watch and be enjoyed. Once, when bowling against Marist, I broke a batsman’s nose and knocked his teeth out. This was in the days before protective helmets. It was not deliberate. You can blame the pitch! I always tried to be a good sport, competitive, but enjoying what I was doing.

God intends us to be healthy holistic people and we are given gifts and talents to use. These include mental and physical talents as well as character - skill, practice, determination, courage, speed, stamina, accuracy, balance, responsive reflexes, understanding your own team and your opponents – these are all essential in sport, and important in life.

Earlier times

St Paul came from Tarsus in Asia-Minor once colonised by the Greeks. Tarsus had a synthesis of East and West, Greek and Oriental. St. Paul was clearly no stranger to sport, and chose to use athletic metaphors in his epistles related to the Greek Games, e.g. “run the race, to win the prize.” (Philippians 3:12-16; 1 Corinthians 9:24-27)

The Greek word for faith was originally a sports term. The Greek word *pistis* means persuasion or conviction, and was used in reference to playing or running with conviction. In the ancient Greek games, athletes had to run and avoid many pitfalls and traps; at the end of the race they would fall exhausted into the arms of trusted ones who gave them some relief (falling into the arms of our Lord and Saviour). Someone who has faith has the sort of conviction shown by someone who is giving everything in running a race.

High expectations in 2011

Bring on the games. Bring on the Rugby World Cup. A real New Zealand festival - showing sportsmanship to players and fans alike. Let’s demonstrate to overseas visitors that our reputation for hospitality is not in mere words but shown in deeds.

This is what God in sport can be all about, looking after others, enjoying the spectacle, acknowledging skill wherever it is seen. Playing to win, but honouring our opponents if we lose. Humility in winning and graciousness in defeat.

May God be in the sport and in the Rugby World Cup.

Winton Davies

The Reverend Winton Davies has served in parishes, and hospital and police chaplaincy roles, for over 50 years. He has been avidly interested in sport all his life.



God, games and competition

“Sport is war minus the shooting.”¹

“Everyone has won and all must have prizes.”²

Most games (and sports, if there is a difference) are competitive pastimes, which we play as individuals or as part of a team, usually against at least one other person or team, and for which there are agreed rules which lead to there being a winner. Of course there are solitary games/sports (e.g. crosswords and fishing) and non-competitive team sports such as tramping, but I argue that these are exceptions.

I find when I mention the topic of ‘God and Sport’ that most people immediately start to think of televised professional sport – particularly rugby, rugby league, cricket, tennis, netball and football. Some prompting is needed before we recognise the truly astonishing variety of other competitive games we follow or play: from bridge to bowls; Cluedo to curling; and darts to diving.

Some Christians are uneasy about several aspects of sport, and here I focus on four: professionalism, body-contact, competition and the general question of having fun.

Professional sport is comparatively new to New Zealand, but that does not make it wrong. Because there is now money involved, more care is needed over things such as match-fixing, manufacture and sales of products, player contracts and so on. However, this is little different from regulating any other form of business. It’s hard to be negative about professional sport without also being negative about any form of money economy.

Any sport which involves players coming into bodily contact with one another has the potential to be physically damaging e.g. netball; but it’s the few exceptional ‘collision’ sports like rugby and gridiron which get the attention. Ought the possibility of injuring one another during a game rule that game out of order? I think not, as long as players are not mismatched physically, and there are equipment, rules and referees intended to protect players from careless or intentional injury.

Some child psychologists have argued that fathers who have rough-and-tumble play with their children are doing

something very important. As they play-wrestle they teach their children the basic rules of body contact games: no biting, no scratching, no kicking or hitting. We are embodied people, unities of body and spirit, with deep needs to be in touch relationships with others. Physical contact games provide one context for those relationships.

There seems to be something hard-wired within men and women about competitiveness. If there’s a way of setting up a competition someone will find it, even if it’s only to find the best pikelets at the local A&P show. If we are truly *imago Dei*, I wonder how comparisons and competitiveness feature in the Trinity. And surely – unlike in business – there’s usually nothing of substance riding on the competition in a game. Yes, we must guard against the sin of ‘winning at all costs’, but most of the time, games offer safe competition, where players can practice what it is like to assess oneself against others. I need an opponent so that the game can be played. In addition, each needs the other to be playing the best they can be – and therein lies competition.

Is it OK for Christians to have fun? Times have changed since an English bishop, a hundred years ago, noted that he used to play cricket ‘until he was ordained’. And another clergyman in the same period suggested that declining church attendance could be attributed to the invention of the bicycle! Nowadays we’re more inclined to think that in creation God invented fun. Work as drudgery appears as a consequence of sin in the world – God’s creative fun comes first.

So I contend Christians should rejoice in the God-given gift of enjoying games, including international collision games of a particular variety, played out in New Zealand in September and October!

Lyall Perris

The Reverend Lyall Perris takes part in mid-week tramping and evenly-matched Scrabble contests with Sally; and has been known to watch sport on the spot or via TV.

(Footnotes)

¹ attributed to George Orwell

² the dodo (*Alice in Wonderland*)

Contact us

The Wellington Library is located based on the first floor of the Anglican Centre, 18 Eccleston Hill (off Hill Street), Thorndon, Wellington. Contact Administrator/Librarian Ashley Edge at 04 472 1057 (library) or WITLibrary@wn.ang.org.nz
Contact Director Deborah Broome at 04 475-9085 or debroome@paradise.net.nz
The Palmerston North Library is located at St Peter’s Church, 229 Ruahine St, Palmerston North.
Correspondence should be addressed to the WIT Council c/o the Anglican Centre.

This newsletter was coordinated by Lyall Perris and designed by Darryl Ward. www.theword.tk