The State of Play

Paul Bickley

Prepared by Theos for Christians in Sport and Bible Society
November 2014

BIBLE SOCIETY

CHRISTIANS IN SPORT

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Our objective is to show Christianity has a serious and important contribution to make to public life in the UK today. We conduct research, publish essays and reports and hold public lectures and debates on the role of religion in general and Christianity specifically in public life. We also provide research consultancy services to organisations in the public, private and voluntary sectors.

Previous reports include *"Doing God": A Future for Faith in the Public Square, Free to Believe? Religious Freedom in a Liberal Society and Give us our Ball Back: Reclaiming Sport for the Common Good.* We have hosted lectures from, among others, Mark Thompson (former Director General of theBBC), Jonathan Sacks (the Chief Rabbi) and John Micklethwait (editor of the Economist), as well as running debates on the future of the welfare state, on international development and on Darwinism, in venues like Westminster Abbey, the RSA and the Commonwealth Club.

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Executive summary

This report addresses the connections between Christianity and sport, particularly in the light of what is perceived to be a growing ethical crisis in the world of sport. What is an authentic Christian response to the growing significance of sport?

The report reviews some of the growing body or literature which seeks to explore the connections between religion and sport, specifically that which offers a theological account of sport. It then explores the outline of a theological account in the context of semi-structured one-to-one interviews with Christian professional athletes, chaplains and others working in the field. These theological engagements with sport have identified it as offering a field of human freedom and joy and indeed of offering the possibility of transcendent, 'godward', experience.

The corresponding critique is that sport is increasingly subjected to a range of extrinsic concerns – for example, market or public policy demands. Sport's transcendental and aesthetic possibilities, as well as its sheer popularity, also open it to the possibility of 'idolatry' or – in other words – to accord it an ultimate significance. These factors combine to create an environment where athletes are under pressure to act as societal role models, but also to achieve sporting success, sometimes resulting in high profile accounts of poor behaviour on and off the field of play.

Our interviews with athletes support this critique of sport at the elite level. Overall, they tended to see their play as 'work', albeit in an environment which offers little job security, and often felt a sense of anxiety brought on by perceived fan expectations. Players said that their faith helped them achieve a sense of perspective and that it gave them an identity outside of their sporting performance.

Interviews with chaplains expanded this picture: we found that their role was primarily focused on holistic player welfare and pastoral concerns for players in the round, rather than catering for the 'spiritual needs' of religious players. They had concerns over the impact of the elite sporting context on personal relationships of players, and argued anecdotally that various forms of addiction – most often, gambling – were particularly prevalent in professional sport.

In conclusion we argue that an authentic theological response to sport is to celebrate it, but also to circumscribe its importance. Practically, sport chaplains do this by focusing not on player performance but on athlete well-being – and indeed the well-being of others in sports clubs. We call for reflection on what other acts might simultaneously celebrate and limit the importance of sport.

In a closing provocation, we include a sporting decalogue – a Ten Commandments of Sport.

Introduction

Without having to think too hard about it, people have concluded that sport bears a striking resemblance to religion.

John Oliver, British presenter of the hit HBO late night talk-show, *Last Week Tonight*, recently used the notion to skewer FIFA on its record of (alleged) bullying of sovereign states and corruption.

> Soccer is not just [a religion] – it's an organised religion, and FIFA is its church. Just think about it. Its leader is infallible, it compels South American countries to spend money they don't have building opulent cathedrals and it may ultimately be responsible for the deaths of shocking numbers of people in the Middle East. But for millions of people around the world, like me, it's also the guardian of the only thing that gives their lives any meaning.[1]

That sport is like a religion, however, is not just a useful comic cliché. It is also a way – for Oliver at least – of pointing to sport's moral failures. Like Marx's 'opiate of the masses', or Kant's critique of 'priestcraft', sport – irresistible though it is – is guilty of deep hypocrisy, abusing popular devotion for its own gain.

What are we to make of this analogy? The scholarly consensus that, in the late modern era, sport reflects, and in some ways has come to supplant, religious identification and practice. Harry Edwards, an American sociologist, was one of the first scholars to develop an integrated social and institutional account of sport, and argued in 1973 that 'sport... has achieved a status not unlike that enjoyed by traditional religions'.[2] It's not, though, just a matter of status but of sport's very nature. Karl Barth observed that 'what is called sport seems to have become the playground of a particular earth-spirit'.[3] In his *Rumours of Angels*, sociologist Peter Berger argued that the instinct to play was one of five 'signals of transcendence', and Catholic scholar Michael Novak that 'sports may be the single most powerful manifestation' of 'godward' signs in contemporary life.[4]

Perhaps all Edwards and others have done is remember what for most of history would have been unnecessary to say, yet we have somehow forgotten – sport, play and religious belief are deeply interwoven. The question is not *whether* this is the case, but

in what ways this is the case, and – for churches and agencies that are interested in their intersection – what, if anything, that entails.

Are sport and religion rivals? Or are they just the same thing?

On the one hand, Edwards noted that sport incorporates many of the components of religious life – 'feeling and ritual... organised principles which give meanings to secular strivings and sufferings' and beliefs about sport which 'support social values and norms'.[5] Those social values and norms didn't initially conflict with the Christian tradition, because they were drawn from the Christian tradition, as with the movement called 'Muscular Christianity'. Now, however, people of good will – religious and otherwise – are increasingly conscious that they do not share the values embodied in sport and sporting institutions.

Already, in the first paragraphs of a discussion on sport and faith, we can begin to sense the complexity of the relationship. Sport is a rival of religion, but in its modern manifestations it is also a relation to religion – perhaps even its child. Families, it could be argued, should stick together and help each other out when they can. One possible response is for the church to draw on the symbolic capital of sport and sporting loyalties, in more or less the same way as sport rests and relies on religious patterns. Since St Paul employs a series of athletic metaphors, why would churches and Christian agencies not draw on sport for the sake of the gospel?

On the other hand, Christianity was in no small way responsible for the de-sacralisation of sport. If, in the ancient world sport, religion and the ideals of citizenship coexisted in an undifferentiated mix, then it was Christianity that began to differentiate them, partly through pursuing the Jewish refusal to worship the created rather than the creator and partly through a less healthy suspicion of the human body. The position of the early church was clear – sport was generally to be opposed on the basis of its tendency to idolatry, if occasionally it was open to use for teaching purposes.[6] On what basis, other than sport's undeniable popularity, should Christians alter that position now?

"It was win at all costs"

Indeed, is there not all the more reason to be suspicious of sport? At least in the past it enshrined the disciplines of self-disciple, courage and self-sacrifice. In simple terms, it was at least useful for moral development. It now seems the hotbed of the worst human behaviour. The stories of athletes like Lance Armstrong – quoted above in the

sub-heading – are a microcosm of what the public perceive has happened to all of sport. It does not stand for what we used to think it stood for – it was naivety, we think, that saw us believe that there was something inherently virtuous about sport. Like John Oliver, we'll continue to enjoy it – but only by holding our noses.

No surprise, then, that the position of the Church vis-à-vis sport has changed over time, occupying various points on a spectrum ranging from outright rejection, through a hard moralism to unashamed appropriation or uncritical embrace. One justification for rethinking the relationship between faith and sport lies in the fact what we now think of when we say the word 'sport' bears little semblance to the gladiatorial contests of the Roman period, medieval tournaments, or of sport in the days of amateurism. Sport is no more or less religious than it ever has been, what is changing is the size and influence of sport institutions, its symbiotic relationship with technologically developed global media markets, and its use by states to project soft power.

These are the changes which have created the conditions for a burgeoning crisis in sporting probity, spanning continents and codes. As much as we'd like our elite sportsmen and women to meet the person specification for the job of 'role model', hardly a day passes without a new on-pitch controversy or personal indiscretion hitting the back pages, giving the lie to the ancient but enduring belief in the intimate (and positive) correlation between physical and moral achievement.[7] Yet the myth somehow endures, giving rise to an ever growing dissonance between what we expect and what we get from sport. As the journalist Simon Barnes puts it

> Professional athletes have become the naughty vicars of the 21st century, required to set a moral example for which they have no inclination and little enough aptitude. Sport means very much more to us than mere entertainment, mere partisanship, mere admiration of skills. A moral burden — difficult and confused but utterly inextricable — is placed on the back of every professional athlete.[8]

But there's more to this than the mistakes of young men and women with too much time and too much money on their hands (though as we'll see, that's not a negligible problem). Much more than individual or team achievement is now 'at stake' when players take to the pitch (an appropriate gambling-based phrase). It's not so much the business of sport which demands attention (collectively the clubs playing in the English Premier league made a £291 million loss in 2013/14), but the various businesses, legitimate and otherwise, that surround and depend on sport. Dubious administration

in institutions like the International Olympic Committee and FIFA, as well as alleged corruption in internationally significant competitions like the Indian Premier League, has led to a sense of institutional crisis not unlike that affecting political, financial or public sector institutions. It's not just the probity of players that is questioned, but that of administrators and governing bodies. Does all this suggest that bad player behaviour is not merely a sign of bad weather, but a sign of climate change, where sport is changing in fundamental ways?

The state of play

If someone wanted to outline a practical programme of Christian action to the sporting world as it is now, what would that look like? Given the close relationship between religion and sport, what are we to make of the ethical crisis besetting sport? Is it even real? And if it is, what can be done about it?

In our first section, we look to develop a theologically aware description of contemporary elite sport. It's clear that there are a series of points of engagement, but the root of the theological chord are the ideas of the transcendent possibilities of sport (and therefore a possible drift into idolatry) and 'ludic diffusion' – that sport has lost its sense of fun, joy. To paraphrase Novak on Nixon, we've turned sport into a module on an MBA course, rather than a lesson in liberty and joy.[9]

These are not original insights. However, we go on to do what many theological engagements fail to do, which is to test those allegations against the experience of elite level sports players.[10]

In our second section, therefore, we report the results of one-to-one interviews with athletes and former athletes. We find that this small cross section of elite Christian athletes report, amongst other things, a sense of 'ludic diffusion' as they progress through their careers. Of course, they do not describe it in these terms. They do describe their early love of the game being overtaken by anxiety about their progress at elite level, their own bankability, fan pressure or the threat of injury, or lifestyle distractions. These are familiar psychological aspects of elite level sport, but they are usually understood as an inevitable 'part of the game'.

We suggest that, for a proportion of Christian athletes at least, the contribution of their faith is not directly to improve performance or behaviour, whether on or off pitch, but to help them conceive of sport as a penultimate endeavour. Sport may be their job, it may

be their passion, and they dedicate much of their time, attention and energy towards it. But their faith promotes an understanding of sport which holds that it, and their success within it, is not an ultimate source of identity and purpose. As one interviewee put it, quoting the Westminster Shorter Catechism, 'If they're a Christian, their identity is in Christ – not in their sport... the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever'.

In the light of this theological and empirical work we turn to consider what an authentically Christian response might be? In the first instance, we report the results of one-to-one interviews with chaplains. We outline how they see themselves, their role and their context. While their role is primarily conceived, even by chaplains themselves, as pastoral rather than evangelistic (more common in the US), still less 'prophetic'. We suggest, however, that – at its best – sports chaplaincy is a kind of gentle iconoclasm. In the act of offering non-instrumental support in an instrumentalised context, sports chaplaincy insists that what is most significant is not sport – the individual athlete's performance, or the fortunes of the club, but the individual in relationship with God and others. Chaplains have the potential to gently destroy the 'graven images' of the game, or at least to gradually loosen their hold over players and clubs.

In conclusion, we acknowledge that sport chaplains – abstracted from an authentic cultural and prophetic response from the wider church and Christian community – offer only a muted and subtle challenge to idolatrous sporting structures. We argue, therefore, that it needs to be located in a wider practical response which offers both affirmation and challenge.

Like the early church, we need to insist on a certain de-sacralisation of sport. The claim that there are aspects of the sporting world that are idolatrous can't be dismissed, yet there may be ways in which these can be resisted – for example, by the often controversial decision not to play on Sundays. Simultaneously – while we are in the business of pointing out that sport is not God – we need to offer a positive account of how to think about (and spectate and play sport), from a Christian perspective. The theological centre of gravity is the emphasis on play, which is being renewed and refined in contemporary theological work.

Our aspiration is that this report will provoke thinking and help develop practice. The question is not just what we should think but, in Lenin's famous phrase, what is to be done? In closing, as a kind of a provocation for reflection and tangible action, we offer a sporting decalogue. What, from a Christian perspective, would a ten commandments of sport look like?

Endnotes

1. The reference to the deaths of 'shocking numbers of people in the Middle East' is an allusion to accusations that the government of Qatar is abusing migrant labour in its attempt to prepare for the 2022 World Cup. See Ian Black, Owen Jones and Robert Booth, 'Qatar promises to reform labour laws after outcry over 'World Cup slaves'', *The Guardian*, 15 May 2014. The full John Oliver clip can be seen here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DlJEt2KU33I&feature=kp
2. Harry Edwards, *Sociology of Sport, Dorsey Press* (1973).
3. Karl Barth, *The Christian Life. Church Dogmatics IV/4: Lecture Fragments*, Edinburgh, T&T Clark (1981).
4. Quoted in Robert Ellis, *The Games People Play: Theology, Religion and Sport*, Wipf and Stock (2014), p. 286.
5. Eric Bain-Selbo, *Game Day and God: Football, Faith, and Politics in the American South*, Mercer University Press (2009), p. 45.
6. Lincoln Harvey, *A Brief Theology of Sport*, SCM (2014), p. 31.
7. The Greek concept of 'arête' – excellence – dominated thinking about sporting ability and ethics, but this is not simply a trope of ancient Greece. In the Gospel of John, when Jesus and his disciples encounter a blind man, the disciples ask "who has sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?". Jesus' answer was neither.
8. Simon Barnes, 'Athletes, the naughty vicars of the 21st century', *The Times*, 23 September 2011.
9. "Nixon talked about sports but played little. Sports were part of his work; he made them lessons in morality, rather than in liberty and joy". Michael Novak, *The Joy of Sports*, Madison Books (1993), p. xviii.
10. Exceptions include Robert Ellis's survey reported in Robert Ellis, 'The Meanings of Sport: An Empirical Study into the Significance Attached to Sporting Participation and Spectating in the UK and US', *Practical Theology* 5.2 (April 2012), pp. 169-88.

Views from the boundary

The long running radio cricket commentary programme, *Test Match Special*, has for many years run an item called 'View from the Boundary'. Running on the Saturday lunchtime of Tests played in England (and Wales), it features interviews with guests from non-cricketing backgrounds. They speak about their lives, but also share their appreciation for the sport. The piece points away from the game, reminding listeners that there are people and matters of significance away from the field of play. The game requires a perspective from beyond itself to establish its true significance – it needs a view from the boundary.

The purpose of this section is to offer a very brief outline of a theological view from the boundary, with the intention of setting the stage for our exploration of the experience of players and the work of sport chaplains. We stress that this is far from exhaustive. Interested readers could search out fuller literature reviews elsewhere.[1]

Play

As a way of beginning this brief sketch, it's worth noting that whenever 'sport' is written about or discussed, problems of definition and boundaries arise. What are we talking about, and what are we not talking about? Some of those writing in the field simply pick on the 'usual suspects'. In his seminal book *The Joy of Sport*, Michael Novak focuses on what he describes as the 'holy trinity' of American sport: (American) football, baseball and basketball. In the UK, we usually have a different trinity in mind: football, cricket and rugby, though football is clearly the chief surrogate deity. And when we think of these, we usually think of international competitions, great test series, or the biggest clubs in the biggest leagues – but this is incomplete, and whatever we think say or do about sport must be capable of explaining and unpacking a diverse range of activities.[2]

The difficulty of achieving a definition has led philosophers to look not for the boundaries of sport, but for its essence. They usually find the idea of play, identified by the Dutch philosopher Johan Huzinga as a pre-cultural element of human life ("play is older than culture"). Rejecting reductionist biological explanations of play, he wonders why nature offered the "tension, mirth and fun" of play, the last of which "resists all analysis, all logical interpretation" – an evocative definition of sport.

For Huzinga, play is an anthropological absolute ("we find play present everywhere as a well-defined quality of action which is different from 'ordinary' life"). First and foremost, argues Huzinga, play is "never imposed by physical necessity or moral duty. It is never a task. It is done at leisure, during 'free time'". A second characteristic of play is that it requires a stepping out of ordinary life into specific spaces and specific times where different rules apply. A third characteristic is that it is ordered – it requires rules, which if persistently broken mean that play will no longer be taking place. A fourth, that it tends to the creation of 'play communities' – clubs of players, spectators and so on. It offers a kind of transcendence: "In play there is something "at play" which transcends the immediate needs of life and imparts meaning to the action".

On an explanatory level, the idea that play is the essence of sport is an attractive and powerful one. For many social commentators it has provided a conceptual basis for both the appreciation and critique of sport in its modern manifestation. Huzinga's fundamental argument has also been useful to theologians looking to develop a theological account of sport. For Jesuit theologian Hugo Rahner, God is the "ultimate player". For Jürgen Moltmann, in creation and incarnation God was playful while we – *homo faber*, man the worker – experience a degree of alienation in our attempts to play.[3] Similarly, Robert K. Johnston of Fuller Theological Seminary agrees that modern commercialised sport has lost its playfulness, and thus its sacred roots. And play lies at the centre of Novak's thesis in *The Joy of Sport*, where sport has been "raised to such a pitch of technical organisation and scientific thoroughness that the real play-spirit is threatened with extinction".[4]

Some kind of account of play, then, is the horizon on which most theologians or Christian scholars orientate themselves, allowing them to account for (and affirm) the apparently transcendental (and hence religious) nature of sport and other forms of play while also allowing for social critique. The key to the idea of play is the freedom it implies. In technical terms, it is 'autotelic' – its purpose is only itself, or it is not play.

It's clear that sport is more than play – and philosophers and theologians continually look to offer finer distinctions. Indeed, for Huzinga the play element can be found in many elements of culture, from poetry to war. Robert Ellis argues in his recent book that we must take account not only of play, but also of the *agon* of sport – the struggle or competition against self or others and the desire to win.[5] Although all play is ordered, sport is also rule bound in a way that other forms of play are not. Again, though, the

rules are arbitrary – they serve nothing other than the game, and there is no 'reason' why they are this way, and not that.[6]

We must resist the temptation to excavate what is, in any case, only the philosophical topsoil here. The essential point is that, for most theologians who have sought to offer an account of modern sport, it is the absence or distortion of this sense of freedom which sport should offer which is their main complaint. It's a metaphysical complaint, but it provides the ground for a practical social and ethical critique. It is a loss of the unnecessariness of sport which creates the conditions for many of the ethical and moral compromises of modern sport, or so the argument goes. We turn now to discuss these in greater depth.

Ethical concerns

We have already noted the moral expectations placed on elite athletes – but there's also a sense in which sport reflects the society in which it is created. We are concerned about what happens on the field of play and in the dressing room, and we hope that it is administrated transparently and fairly, because we feel that it is an expression of the virtues and vices of wider society. If athletes are the naughty vicars of the 21st century, then their naughtiness matters because, like vicars, they are accorded a priestly – representative – function.

Some theological voices – echoing the tradition of muscular Christianity – are inclined to highlight positive social impact of sport (team work, self-discipline and – sacrifice, courage and so on). This has been the tone, for instance, of recent Papal and Vatican engagements with sport. For others, this is too naïve. They highlight the way in which a "quest for deeper spiritual meaning" has been occluded by the desire for "external gains, such as winning for personal glory and status and/or financial greed".[7]

Watson and Parker, drawing on others, take us through the charge sheet – none of which seem exaggerated: physical and verbal abuse of opponents and even teammates, fan violence, including sectarianism in football, intimidation, blatant disregard for the spirit of the rules, mistaking legality for ethicality, sexual abuse of athletes by coaches, praying to win, trash talk, cheating, playing with pain and injuries, financial greed and corruption, alienation in individual and international relations, invasive non-corrective surgery for athletic performance enhancement, drug-doping, abuse of officials, genetic-enhancement technologies, abusive child and youth elite development academies,

overtraining and abuse of one's body and the potential deleterious effects of excessive expectations and pressure from parents, coaches and even nations.

An essential question, on which there is no real consensus, is whether anything fundamental has changed with regard to sport or whether it was always thus. With players under fierce scrutiny, on and off the pitch, it could be that we're simply more aware of player misbehaviour. The same applies to the alleged corruption of administrators, under the spotlight of the media. Perhaps we overestimate the ethic disorder of contemporary sport, because the sports and the players that are most keenly observed. Answers will often depend on our underlying theological account of the nature of the sport. Those that have emphasised the play element as the essence of sport have been able to map ethical decline onto its loss. Play, it is argued, is displaced as sport is bureaucratised and commoditised for global consumption, a process driven by a desire to make individual leagues as profitable as possible.[8]

Do we wrongly idealise the past? Are we guilty of a false jumpers-for-goalposts nostalgia? No. Inevitably, those codes which are watched closely are those which are most popular, and therefore where the stakes are highest, and the power of markets most pervasive. If there is a sense of nostalgia, it would not be because sport ever existed in prelapsarian perfection, but because of comparatively recent and rapid change. Aside from football, horseracing and boxing, most sports were mainly amateur until the 1960s. Professionalism was a product of the development of a nexus between sport, television/the media, sponsorship and advertising. It's not the desire to make money on the back of sporting events is new, but in the last 40 years the scope for such activity increase exponentially. The limits and implications of this marketisation are still being explored.

Financial concerns are not the only possible driver of such changes. Sport participation rates are now a matter of concern amongst politicians (that there is such a thing called 'participation rates' is surely evidence of the bureaucratisation). Physical education in the school system is a key policy concern, with the Coalition government offering a 'PE and Sports Premium' worth (a smallish) £450 million over three years.

Of course, these issues are not entirely novel. There are always those who have sought to profiteer from sporting events – and we falsely romanticise sport if we do not concede that much of its growth lies in its power to entertain. Equally, political attention for sport is, of course, mainly driven by a concern public health, and arguably is simply a contemporary incarnation of the Victorian rational recreation movement.[9]

We have neither the space nor the competence to establish beyond certainty that sport is more unethical now than it was 20, 50 or 100 years ago. Two things are certain: first, there is little evidence to support the deeply rooted idea that physical and moral excellence are intimately related to each other. Sport is a field on which the 'positive values' and choices can be expressed, but there is nothing about sport per se which inculcates them, and much about the present sporting context which will do the opposite.

Second, it is manifestly the case that the way sport is now experienced has radically changed. It would now be seen as quaint to measure a sport's health (or popularity) by physical attendance.[10] Rather, we rest on financial measures – a club's 'brand value', or the price of broadcasting rights. These subtle changes in what is valued – rather the exchange of value for price – are, it is true, an experience of tensions and debates felt in wider society. It is also true that ill effects have not been intended, but it would be odd to argue that it has not altered how players, coaches and administrators think and act. As we will see when we come to our interviews, this threads through the behaviour of everyone – from spectators to administrators – and the effect is not positive. One (now retired) player concluded his interview with us with this reflection.

> Fear engulfs the whole thing... if the Premiership doesn't sell the rights to such and such then they won't get £100 billion, then the clubs won't get as much, then the international players will leave the Premiership, then people will be watching something else. In football, because there's a value that's gone up, there's an expectancy that's gone up. Not many fans have patience, people want it now... but what is success now? Is it winning the league, is it coming fourth?

This can be read as a deep theological insight into the spiritual ambiguity of sport. There have always been rewards for winning, and money is hardly the only thing that would corrode moral judgement, but the use of the word 'fear' highlights both sport's potential for idolatrous claims and the way it alienates those in the sporting world from each other. The paradoxical witness of Scripture is that it is Yahweh who merits fearfulness, yet also in Christ fear is abolished ("fear not, for I have overcome the world" – John 16.33). Christians rightly have qualms for any system which depends on or manufactures fear.

Lincoln Harvey observes the risks inherent in finding an authentic theological account of sport. Some, he observes, have extended on their account of play by arguing that

the transcendence of play achieves a participation in the divine. Caution should be exercised, he suggests, because the Church – whatever its confusions around how to account for the irresistible popularity of sport – has always insisted that "worship is worship and sport is sport". For Harvey, we must say that sport is a participation in our own created, creaturely contingency, not in the ultimacy of God. Indeed, the proper secularity of sport, which is now fraying, "is testimony to the Church's success in de-coupling [worship and sport]. If we don't say this, then sport is no longer 'like a religion', but simply a religion – providing fans and players alike with their systems of worship, judgement and salvation and sources of meaning.

In other words, sport can be – and increasingly is – idolatrous, a substitution of the Creator with the created. This is not an idle or lazy accusation – for many people, the symbols and narratives of sport precisely offer what faith has offered in the past. Gibson, commenting on the large number of sport-themed inscriptions on headstones in a cemetery in East Belfast notes that the transcendental possibility of sport means that it "can lift people out of the mundane and into the quasi-mystical". It has the potential to take us "perilously close to idolatry... a false religion that usurps the place that God alone ought to have in the lives of individuals and communities".[11] As much as sport is distorted by a love of money, it can also be distorted by a love of sport.

There are others, like Robert Ellis, who would dissent in significant ways and are far more sympathetic to the transcendent possibility of sport. For him, sport is a field of embodied salvation – "our striving for excellence, our straining to win, our seeking of the Transcendent through moments of transcendence is a means to lay hold of some kind of experience of salvation... God is not merely at work in the church, but is immanent in the world at work everywhere for human wholeness, overcoming sin and leading men and women to greater fullness of life".[12] What can be made of such a claim? We explore further below.

The problem of moralism

Some, of course, would suggest this whole enterprise – an attempt to think theologically about sport – is misguided. Wondering round in this theological hinterland, they would claim, is worse than unnecessary. Ethical concerns can be dealt with by better regulation, player education or even legislation. Any claim about 'ludic diffusion', a loss of freedom and playfulness, is either bad history or suffers from the charge of hopeless idealism – sport is 'big business', and we ought to get used to it. In fact, why do we think more

money in a game like football is 'a bad thing'? A minority of players will always be foolish and venal – but more money means better and safer stadia, greater access, and most clubs and leagues take their responsibility to their communities seriously.

As for talk of sporting idolatry – is that jealously, or plain old Puritanism? The religious really hate it when people enjoy themselves.

None of these responses would be completely without foundation. Watson and Parker point to Charles Taylor's discussion of the failure of Victorian sporting moralism in his book, *A Secular Age*.

> All this provoked... protest against a narrowing of the ends of life to a code of conduct: This ethic of discipline, in both believing and unbelieving variants, was a moralism. It put discipline, self-control, the achieving of high moral standard as the supreme goal. This tended to be true even of the Evangelical modes, which had after all started in the previous century as a reaction against narrow moralism, for instance in the emotionally liberating preaching of Wesley. Like all moralism, it could come to be seen as too thin, too dry, concerned so exclusively with behaviour, discipline, control, that it left no space for some great élan or purpose which would transform our lives... This complaint... that modern, moral, disciplined life represses feeling, recurs again and again in the last two centuries. It is one of the defining concerns of the modern world.[13]

This bears quoting at such length in order to demonstrate that, even if we have correctly diagnosed the malaise of contemporary sport, we need to be careful that we identify the right prescription. Given the theological emphasis on the play ethic in most contemporary theological engagement, a resort to moralism is theologically incoherent, as well as being unattractive. The outcome of the gospel, interacting authentically with a particular aspect of human culture should be a more expansive life, rest and the lifting of burdens (John 10.10, Matthew 11.30). If the Christian witness in the world of sport is simply to enforce codes of behaviour (probably a futile endeavour, in any case), then it is very much distorted.

Further, Watson and Parker suggests that, in any case, moralism would simply retrench the deeper problem – that of "the obsessive, driven and results-oriented Protestant 'work-ethic' (and Marxist ideologies) that has shaped modern life and professional sport in many western nations". To cap it all off, moralism could be pastorally disastrous

for professional athletes, since the result of the ethic identified by Watson is "clinical levels of social and competitive anxiety, substance abuse, eating disorders, narcissistic tendencies, and moral emotions, such as guilt, shame, depression, suicide and suicidal ideation".

This has obvious implications for discerning what the nature of a Christian mission to professional athletes, which we will explore further in the next following sections.

It seems likely that a Christian response might be to say and do three things at once. The first would be to affirm the created nature of sport and defend it as a sphere of human freedom – a genuine gift. The second would be to maintain a strong prophetic voice against the 'ludic diffusion' – whether at the hands of state or market – and indeed the idolatrous distortions of sport, its arrogation of ultimate significance.[14] These are the diseases of which ethical disorder is partially a symptom. So onto the third element, which is a pastoral and missional response to players. The Christian witness to players must be different than the thin and dry moralism, which has historically proven so attractive, in favour the kind of pastoral support required for those suffering from the ill effects of this sporting context.

In the meantime, we will now turn to the interviews conducted with athletes and chaplains, bringing this theological account – this view from the boundary – into dialogue with the view from the dressing room.

Endnotes

1. See Nick J. Watson and Andrew Parker, Sport and the Christian Religion: A Systematic Review of Literature. Cambridge, Cambridge Scholars Publishing (2014), and Nick J. Watson and Andrew Parker, '*Sport and Christianity: Mapping the Field*', in Watson and Parker (eds), *Sport and Christianity: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*. New York, Routledge (2013).
2. We do not have the space here go through the necessary steps to achieve even a provisional definition. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a sport is an "activity involving physical exertion and skill in which an individual or team competes against another or others for entertainment". Even of this broadest of definitions we could immediately ask some questions (for example, what about extreme sports, which may not involve competition). For a brief but clear discussion, readers could refer to Lincoln *Harvey's A Brief Theology of Sport* London, SCM (2014), p. 61 ff.
3. Play in our society of compulsion and work oftentimes does little more than provide a quality of suspension, temporarily unburden us, or assist political stabilisation, work morality, and social regimentation. Quoted in Robert Johnston, *The Christian at Play*. http://www.religion-online.org/showchapter.asp?title=3366&C=2760

4. This paragraph relies on Watson and Parker's, '*Mapping the Field*', p. 16.
5. More controversially, he argues that this can be located theologically: "God too is a winner as well as a player, our winning and the desire to win is some kind of presentiment or anticipation of God's victory: through sport, a locus of salvation in its way, we may participate in this victory over sin, chaos and death". Ellis, *The Games People Play*, p. 277.
6. See Harvey, *A Brief Theology of Sport*, p. 66.
7. Watson and Parker, *'Mapping the Field'*, p. 29.
8. Sport is big business, but it's also a rum business, since it's virtually impossible to make any money from owning a sports club, even in one of the most lucrative leagues in the world. No, the 'big business' of sport is not the owners will make a profit, but that ancillary entertainment businesses will profit. BSkyB profits in 2013 ran to £1.33 billion. http://news.sky.com/story/1120639/bskyb-sees-full-year-profit-up-9-percent-to-1-33bn
9. According to Sport England, during the year up to April 2014, "15.6 million people aged 16 years and over in England played sport at least once a week. That's an increase of more than 1.7 million over 2005/6 – the first year of the survey". http://www.sportengland.org/research/who-plays-sport/ (accessed August 2014). Progress, however, has recently stalled and there has been no obvious 'Olympic bounce'. It's not easy to get people to play – the play instinct, perhaps, is being satisfied elsewhere.
10. Cricket, notionally, is the national sport but its main domestic competition (the county championship) has consistently failed to attract significant crowds in recent years (over the summer of 2012, no county attracted a home attendance of more than 40,000 over eight home matches, though the shorter form t20 league performs better). Average attendance at a Sky Bet League 1 match in the 2013/14 season – the third tier of English football – was a (lower than might be expected) average of 7,478. Attendance at rugby league matches has grown slowly over time, recently plateauing at around 17,000 per match. The English Rugby Union Premiership competition in 2013/14 had an average of 12,754. As with everything Premiership football, with its average attendance of 36,657 per match in the 2013/14 season, frames perceptions.
11. D Gibson, 'Latest Score: Liverpool 20, Manchester United 10', *Ministry Today* 44, September 2008. http://ministrytoday.org.uk/magazine/issues/44/357/
12. Ellis, *Games*, pp. 273-274.
13. Watson and Parker, *'Mapping the Field'*, p. 33 – the reference for the full quote is Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* p. 399.
14. A point made in the recent Declaration on Sports and the Christian Life. See http://www.sportandchristianity.com/

The view from the dressing room

We have argued that 'sport' has changed. Among the many challenges it faces is a loss of a sense of play. We have also noted a developing sense of ethical disruption around the institutions and individuals of sport. They are perceived to have lost connection with the values and aspirations of fans in a rush to 'build global brands'.

Elite players, that group of professional sportsmen (usually) and women who earn and perform at the highest levels, are expected to be role models, virtuous citizens. Inevitably, given the modern sporting context, many do not perform to the expected standard – physical excellence doesn't mean a flourishing moral life. Those that fail to perform are hauled before the court of public opinion, subjected to a new moralism.

What, then, is the experience of the elite athlete? What parts of this theological analysis resonate with his experience of sport? We carried out a small number of confidential interviews with players, exploring their experience of sport in general, and also of their experience of being a Christian and a professional athlete.

In what follows, we suggest that – amongst the players that we interviewed – there was indeed a sense of the loss of a sense of play around elite sport. Of course, the point of being a professional is that they are paid for their role, and it is in some senses their 'work', but our interviewees – as we will see – did not tend to identify that in itself as a loss of a sense of play. Rather, the changes which have taken place in sport cause an intensity of ludic diffusion beyond what might occur for a poet who manages to make living from his or her work.

It's important to establish a caveat and a reservation here. Even in the small number of interviewees we conducted, it became apparent that athletes' experience differs from sport to sport, from club to club, and from individual to individual. According to the Professional Players Federation, there are over 15,600 professional sportmen and women in the United Kingdom.[1] There is surely a need to pay attention not just to the very top tier of profession sport – perhaps the hundred or so individuals who leap to mind when we use the word 'athlete' – but also to the thousands who play professionally, still in the public eye but perhaps only in peripheral vision.

Nevertheless, this small number of interviews provides a counterpoint to the mainly theoretical perspective offered above. Our interviews were semi-structured, and because of geographical spread, training and tour schedules, were usually conducted over Skype/phone.

The joy (and anxiety) of (elite) sport

The author of the long running 'Secret Footballer' column in The Guardian recalled how there was a point at which he considered giving up football. He recalls standing in a tunnel before a match.

> As our coach gave each player a ball, I lifted mine up to my nose and sniffed it. Don't ask me why – I had never done it before as a professional, or since. The ball was brand new and looked so inviting. The smell took me right back to my council estate and the moment when my mum and dad bought me one of my first full-size footballs. It suddenly filled me with all the reasons I'd ever wanted to play the game...[2]

This is a testimony of 'ludic diffusion'. Would this have resonated with our interviewees? To an extent, yes. Here, we encounter a problem for the ludic account of sport. Our interviewees were, or had been, professionals. In this fundamental sense, their play was not 'autotelic' – they play because they are contracted to do so. For one, at least, their sport was very clearly work, and most used the language of work. Their Christian faith, for instance, would mean they try and 'work hard' for their manager or coach, one was a boy 'working' in a man's world, and another gets ready for 'work' on a Monday morning in pre-season.

Play, therefore, is obviously infused with a set of concerns extrinsic to the game, though in itself this isn't necessarily malevolent. At its most basic, success on the pitch was the means of material provision for the family, while failure threatened it. This created an understandable sense of anxiety, particularly during periods of instability or injury and as they looked forward to retirement. This created a paradox – interviewees relayed stories of their early career, and the surprise and pleasure of being able to play all the time, suffering from the gradual encroachment of the possibility of financial reward.

> Your focus changes because you recognise it's not just playing football, but you realise you can play football and make money.

Martin Roderick, a sociologist and ex-professional footballer, has identified exactly this process. In a book based on 55 interviews with professional/international footballers, he draws on Max Weber's understanding of politics as vocation to offer an analogy for professional sport. It is possible to live 'for' or 'off' politics, and though the former does not preclude the prospect of receiving an income, Roderick suggests on the basis of his interviews that an internal process of change is underway in many profession sportsmen. This sees income as increasingly important over time.[3] When personal ambition is being obviated by a desire "to pay the school fees", as cricketer Kevin Pietersen recently put it, or indeed for the more modest levels of provision for a family, it's hard to argue that this is necessarily 'a bad thing', indeed quite the opposite. It may, in fact, simply be of life stage. One player had chosen to leave a club because he wanted to play more – "that's why I was there, not to pick up a pay cheque every month", but is the "joy of sport" a luxury of those who have no dependents?

In practice, the financials were only one of a number of anxieties we encountered. Players spoke of bad fan reaction to performance, poor management, injury, unexpected termination of contract by their club, or the deleterious effect of their career on relational networks, which were stretched and fragile. One player mentioned that in the first three years of marriage he and his wife had moved eight times as the result of repeated loans to other clubs. Another reported the difficulty footballers in particular have with establishing relationships of genuine trust – the question "what does this person want from me" is often at the forefront of players' mind, usually because of previous experiences with those who have sought to use putative friendship for personal gain.

The first of those factors – fan reaction – seemed particularly significant. One interviewee spoke of the effect that player ratings in the local newspaper started to strongly affect his self-perception. Another relayed the experience of listening to a local radio station after breaking into the first team at an early age:

> At 16, I had a bad game – after the game I'm heading home. I jump in the car and my radio was on the local radio station. You could hear people calling in slaughtering you. That's hard for a young lad.

If this is a kind of ludic diffusion, it has little to do with how players approach the game – far more to do with the exposure to the seriousness with which fans approach it. To play with the sport/religion analogy, none of the athletes we interviewed saw themselves as 'gods' – it was the fan that occupied that position. The terrace is an angry, capricious god who must be appeased with great sporting acts. We cited a player in the previous

section who spoke about how fear can come to dominate – part of what players feared was fan reaction. He described how the mood for 'scapegoating' can take hold. "There's that old joke – if the chairman's under pressure, the manager gets sacked". He also described how individuals might be isolated in the dressing room context, perceived to be particularly responsible for the team's plight. It would, he said, be almost impossible for a player to pull things back from that position. It would often be easier for them to leave and start afresh in another club. He would be, quite literally, 'scapegoated', dispatched from the camp into the wilderness for the sin of sporting failure.

It's easy to see how a generalised anxiety might grip players – particularly at 'crunch points' in the careers – and there are enough stories in the public domain about the effects this can have on the mental health of players.[4] The question is whether this should not be considered normative (truisms about high level sport being a 'high pressure environment' come to mind), and what sources of resilience players have to draw on when experience does not meet expectation. As one interviewee put it, "you think it's going to give you so much".

"Football and religion don't mix"?

Amongst the players we spoke to, faith was one way in which this anxiety could be bracketed out. In fact, a difficult period was in one in which players achieve a sense of well-being and identity outside of sport outside their sporting performance or, perhaps even more interestingly, to retain a sense of identity within the context of relative sporting failure.

> I didn't hit the goals, hit the achievements or fulfil my potential as a player at [name of club]. Those four/five years at [the club] were a massive learning curve. I think I matured a lot as a person – I was grounded in my faith more than ever. It just felt like God took everything away from me, so that I realised the game wasn't everything. It's the instrument that I can use to bring glory to him and shine my light but it's not my life completely. I'm a person first and [an athlete] second.

For another interviewee, their identity was a matter of conscious choice. Even for players that claimed faith, sporting idolatry was a live possibility. It was an obligation for the Christian athlete to determine the difference between the penultimate life of sport and the ultimate life in God. In one of the more theologically fully orbed statements in our

interviews, and indeed quoting the Westminster Shorter Catechism (the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever), the player asked:

> What's a person's aim? Who is this person that say's he or she's a Christian? If they're a Christian, their identity is in Christ – not in their sport. Someone said to me recently, 'You're a [sport] player that happens to be a Christian'. No – I'm a Christian that happens to be a [sport] player.

For this player, sport was clearly a potential idol, and sport's claims to be a source of human identity needed to be contested, at least by Christians. There were clear ways in which its significance could be circumscribed, but it was precisely at these points (i.e., when faith took actual substance, rather than existing purely as notional belief or motivations) that faith became contested. A decision not to play on Sunday is rare, and seen deeply controversial and likely to adversely affect a professional career. An effort to gather Christian players in prayer in advance of a match was seen as divisive. A failure to play aggressively could be interpreted as a decision motivated by faith commitments (though the players we interviewed saw no particular conflict between their faith and tough play within the rules).

> Because I hadn't performed, the coaches tried to put it on that. Tried to say that "he just believes that God's going to give it to him on a plate..." My agent used to say, "Football and religion don't mix".

Do players of competitive sports experience religious discrimination? Experience varied, but certainly the dressing room could prove an inhospitable place for expressions of faith: "If it were in the normal workplace, it'd be bullying. Because it's in the dressing room, it's considered banter..." In terms of the relationship between coaching staff and players, it seems that an athlete's faith becomes part of the constant 'discrimination' which all professional athletes experience, mostly on their ability to contribute to a win. As one put it, "Managers just want you to do your job, just come and train and work hard and score goals – they don't want 'extra'". The questions are – will they commit on the pitch in the same way as others, and do they function as part of a team? In some players' experience, a perception had developed that faith got in the way somehow.

How was this resolved? Those we interviewed had tried to articulate the way that their faith offered a greater/different motivation – all people have their reasons for pouring themselves into the game, mine are different. Doing well for the team simply becomes

an aspect of faithfulness to God. In this way, and also because of increased religious diversity in the sporting world, players felt they could achieve a degree of acceptance.

> There are so many cultures and faith in football now that coaches have to be aware of it. You may have Muslims in the team, and others. You all share the same goal in wanting to win a game, but when you look inside they're doing it for different reasons.

Here matters become murky. Our interviewees were aware of tensions between faith and the actual practic, but were also drawing a 'higher motivation' for competition from their faith. We asked whether players would be commit a professional foul. Were they willing to suspend normal ethical judgement in the context of a game? Interviews generally acknowledged that they would – but argued, effectively – that it was within the spirit of the game, broadly understood, even though they may be transgressing individual laws. "I've tried to take someone down. I've been in that situation. I've certainly done it... At the end of the day we're playing a game. You play the game to every extent of the game. If you need to take a yellow card, then you use the rules to the best of your ability to win".

Players, nonetheless, acknowledge that questions around gamesmanship were live and meaningful for professional sportspeople, implying that they were engaged in some kind of ethical reflection about conduct. One said, "I have found it difficult, and seen other Christians find it difficult. Work hard, be the best you can be". Was there a compartmentalisation – what sport ethicists call 'bracketing', where the virtues informed by Christian discipleship were left at the edge of pitch? Perhaps – or perhaps players were responding to something like what Connors described as the 'meta-rule' of sport: if you play, then play to win.[5]

Discussion

Where do these interviews leave our theological account?

While the critique – lodged over recent years by Michael Novak and others – that sport has lost its sense of play offers a convincing picture of a contemporary approach to sport, it needs to be grounded and developed when it comes to the experience of professionals.

It's clear that a strong distinction between work and play is difficult to sustain – for our interviewees, they overlapped in different ways. They clearly perceived what they did as 'work', and therefore in some ways necessary. But that did not mean it was totally necessary. There are, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, a means of limiting the demands of work – it's called the Sabbath. Seeing their sport as employment, from which one ought to rest, is one of the ways that its significance could be circumscribed. Understandings of this practice varied on a spectrum from strict observance of a Sunday as a day of rest through to positions which allowed for Sunday participation.

For our interviewees many problems – ethical and pastoral – rose from the joyless seriousness with which sport is taken, but this was by no means synonymous with professionalisation. This might arise in the perspective of the player who expects fame and fortune – "I thought it would give me so much" – or the fans, whose expectations and judgements can become utterly overbearing. This is only a component, however, of the anxiety or "fear" that can cast a pall over dressing rooms, clubs or leagues when the 'autotelic' meaning of sport evaporates. The causes are difficult to determine, and probably multiple, but the adoption of sport as one of the cornerstones of the global entertainment industry can surely not have helped.

The transcendental possibilities of sport, for both fan and player, make it particular liable to abuse. It is apt to take on ultimate importance, a source of identity and meaning after the "melancholy, long, withdrawing roar" of religious faith. As is so often the case, what replaces belief is not unbelief, but belief in something else. On a personal and individual level players felt there were genuine risks – some described this in the explicitly religious language of idolatry, others simply in the terms of personhood – of needing to recognise that they are a "person first, and a footballer second".

Aside from lifestyle concerns and dressing room behaviour, did players experience *enough* of a sense of conflict between their sport and their faith? It was accorded, above all, the status of the supreme motivation for excelling: "I've got as much reason – even more, really – to want to do well". The practical challenge for Christian players and ministry agencies is how do they inhabit the world of sport, yet challenge it. On a human level, our players spoke of moments when they were able to achieve a perspective on their position as elite athletes, moments of effectively realising that sport is a not-god. For them, this improved their experience of sport, defraying some of the anxiousness that could or had set in. There is something to be learnt from others who, having reflected on aspects of theology and culture, have sought to offer constructive alternatives, such

as the notion of 'faithful presence', to the binary positions of uncritical affirmation and moralistic separation.[6]

Endnotes

1. See http://www.ppf.org.uk/. 'Professional' is a clearer description than 'elite', but we use the two more or less interchangeably in this document.
2. http://www.theguardian.com/football/2012/aug/10/secret-footballer-undercover-premier-league
3. *The Work of Professional Football: A Labour of Love?* London, Routledge (2006). Thanks to Dr Nick Watson for suggesting attention to Roderick's work.
4. For the adverse effect of professional sport on self-perception and identity see Nick Watson, 'Identity in Sport: A Psychological and Theological Analysis', in Parry, J., Watson, N.J., and Nesti, M.N. (eds.). Theology, Ethics and Transcendence in Sports, London Routledge (2011), pp. 107-148.
5. Harvey, *A Brief Theology of Sport*, p. 66.
6. For instance, James Davidson Hunter's advocacy of faithful presence in *To Change the World: Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Later Modern World*, OUP (2010).

Sport chaplaincy

Having explored the theological 'state of play', and considered the experience of elite athletes, we turn now to consider the question of authentic Christian responses to the sporting world. In this section, we report the results of interviews with sports chaplains.

According to Sports Chaplaincy UK – the main umbrella body for sports chaplains in the United Kingdom – there are over 300 sports chaplains working in the UK (the agency estimates that there would be 150,000 chaplaincy opportunities that could be filled). [1]

It's not easy to locate the history of sport chaplaincy – after all, many sport clubs were started by local churches. The model of sport chaplaincy which we will address in this section – one which offers semi-integrated pastoral and spiritual support – is comparatively recent. It's different from, and increasingly replacing, the formal chaplaincy role with a "a past player, friend of the chairman etc – fulfilling functions such as saying grace at the annual dinner and conducting weddings for members of the club".[2] What is clear is that sports chaplaincy in the UK is a rapidly developing emergent phenomenon, in which practice, according to the majority of our chaplaincy interviewees, has outpaced theological reflection. Indeed Jeffrey Heskins, formerly the chaplain of Charlton Athletic, has argued that chaplains are "a model of practical theology... namely to experience the experience and spend time reflecting on it before asking what he or she might enable to happen next as a consequence of that experience".[3]

As part of our research, we interviewed a number of sports chaplains working in a range of settings throughout the UK. Interviews were semi-structured, and conducted either in person or over the phone/via Skype. Our findings are reported below. In the subsequent discussion, we look to situate the roll and work of sport chaplains into our theological account set out in our first section.

What do sport chaplains do?

Part-time unpaid chaplaincy, often combined with local church ministry, has been the model of sport chaplaincy that generally prevailed. One important component of the approach – which we will explore in greater depth below – is the fact that chaplains

are rarely employed by clubs. They are perceived to maintain, therefore, a degree of independence from the club structure.

That said, they clearly occupy their position at the sufferance of the club. They can't operate without their permission, invitation or imprimatur. On occasion, this could result in uncertainty – as much as there might be a change of playing staff following a change of management, a chaplain might find that an incoming manager would not favour their presence, and their opportunity and access could dry up. This is the vulnerable nature a chaplaincy, which offers Christian pastoral care in post-Christendom contexts – secular institutions or spaces where a Christian presence is far from guaranteed.

In general, however, there was a feeling that there was more demand for chaplains than supply. What drove that demand? Several factors seemed important – first, a greater awareness of the pastoral needs of players. The more professional a club, argued one chaplain, the more conscious they are of their responsibility of players. One rugby union coach, hailing from New Zealand, had imported a model of player development resting on six-pillars – tactical, nutritional, technical, mental skills, physical and holistic.[4] For this coach chaplaincy, suggested the chaplain, filled a specific gap not met by other welfare or sport psychology provision.

> The background was of an 18 year old player who died of a massive heart attack. It de-stabilised the whole team... they realised they had coaches for everything – skills coaches, nutrition coaches. They had a welfare officer, but they wanted someone who could plug a pastoral gap.

So the primary role of the sport chaplain was not the provision of formal spiritual or religious 'services' (though chaplains were called on to fulfil this role – see below), but to offer person-centred care/availability. It was not the case that chaplains were self-secularising. Rather, the understood a meaningful and sustainable ministry as one which was responsive to the particular realities of the sporting context.

What pastoral issues did chaplains discuss? First and foremost, they spoke about fragile relationships. Time with family is limited – "once the season starts it's very full on, only a few weeks off and those do not fall during the school holidays". Indeed, in the case of short term loans players would often spend long periods away from their families. International transfers raised issues of cultural isolation, or indeed 'culture shock'. One chaplain described a professional sportsman as someone with a lot of colleagues, but few friends. Gambling, and associated financial problems, were mentioned repeatedly

by chaplains. One said, "It's the no. 1 problem... there's at least one addict in every dressing room... It's right at the heart of dressing room culture, and everyone does it". Another said:

> Afternoon is a difficult time for players. Loads of elite sportsmen have addictive personalities, but they can't do drugs because they're tested every week. In professional sports, there are massive highs followed by real lows – but when you're not playing, where does the rush come from? So they do a lot of gambling or gaming. It's about ease of accessibility – so they're betting on Asian football, dog racing, or whatever.

The emotional difficulties experienced by players struggling with injuries – and, indeed, the difficulties experienced by their families – was also regularly cited, as was family bereavement. Chaplains didn't always provide direct support to players – in fact, one former player cautioned chaplains to be aware of the limits of their expertise (i.e., not counselling people experiencing addition). Working with clubs, chaplains would sometimes signpost services, coordinate support or run preventative education sessions. One chaplain voiced a similar (unresolved) concern.

> At all levels... there's a lot of brokenness in people's lives. Sporting prowess is frequently born of broken homes. Kids who've been kicked out of the house [and told] 'I don't want to see you 'till tea time'. Once you get involved and say you're available, you open yourself up to a massive pastoral workload.

Did chaplains address issues of ethics and probity amongst players? No, and yes. In our first section, we discussed the difficulty or a moralistic response, and chaplains were conscious of the need to avoid this. As with a desire to avoid heavy-handed attempts at proselytism, chaplains valued their hard-won relationships with athletes and others. However, what would be perceived in the wider world to be issues of probity, ethics and behaviour are usually seen by chaplains as an issue of player welfare. Gambling might traditionally be an issue ripe for moralism, but for chaplains it was clearly one which needed to be understood in the light of the environmental factors – youth, high incomes, fragility in relationships, and so on. We asked one chaplain if he thought sport chaplaincy was different from chaplaincy in other fields.

> It's probably 75% the same but 25% different. Naturally competitive environment – people are really driven. If you've made it, then you've

> really pushed. Sporting Chance has raised the issue of addiction amongst athletes, and there's a high percentage of addiction, divorce, bankruptcy.

This did not just extend to the first team players – chaplains worked broadly with the club staff, broader community and with youth and academy squads (an important focus for many). Among the many pastoral challenges mentioned were occasions of clubs facing financial difficulties, and the ensuing redundancy of staff. A number of clubs maintained memorial gardens, so chaplains could be called upon to officiate at the scattering of ashes, or to mark traumatic events in the life of the club or local community.

More than hatching, matching, dispatching

The key to our chaplains' explanation of their role is the dictum "pastorally proactive – spiritually reactive", by which they meant that they would be consciously looking for opportunities to build relationships amongst the club community but they would only address spiritual issues at the instigation of others. Most indicated that they would not seek to 'proselytise', and that they did not seek to measure their success through conversions.

> Someone asked me, "Do I have to talk about God?" No. If you want that conversation, I'll have that conversation. You need to show that, even as Christians, we're still normal people.

Chaplains would look to meet the needs of religious players – prayer meetings, Bible-studies and so on (including organising provision for players of other faiths). Indeed, sometimes they could safely do what it was difficult for religious players to do (for example, prayer sessions for players before matches – as we record above, it had proved difficult for a player to do this: "When it comes from a player speaking about faith, people are very closed to it. When a chaplain's affiliated to a club, it becomes acceptable"). However, a general presence and availability at training sessions, during physiotherapy sessions with injured players, at matches, or even on the team bus, perhaps constituted the greater part of their work.

What, then, are chaplains seeking to offer? The concept of servanthood was significant for chaplains, as was a desire for proactive engagement with people beyond the four walls of the church. Interviews felt that this required a particular type of individual (according to some organising chaplains, individuals were hand-picked for their suitability for particular opportunities), capable of building trusting relationships in a

community not automatically disposed to give chaplains a hearing. One chaplain spoke of the majority of – particularly young – players being "un-churched, and only a minority de-churched". This meant that in the early stages of their work, or those who were less established in the culture of the club, there could be a stage of "sticking out like a sore thumb" or being "a bit of a lemon" with the aim of "winning a hearing". As one put it, in the early days a chaplain is like a "stray dog – they either kick you out or start to feed you". This was a difficult time, but would often be surmounted eventually – as one chaplain put it, "all of a sudden, you feel like you're part of what's going on".

What did chaplains not get involved in? What were the limits of their role? In some ways, this was the most interesting question we explored in our chaplain interviews.

First, we have already noted that they did not see themselves as evangelists. This was a first step in establishing a relationship of trust with a club and with players. As one player put it, "Chaplains can be seen as someone who represents just a church and he wants something... Players are cute with things that. A lot of people want stuff from them".

In fact, if anything, some understood themselves to have a role helping to "fashion churches which can receive sportspeople" – this might even mean protecting players from ministers who wanted to push Christian athletes in speaking positions that they were uncomfortable or unsuited for, or from simply being valued as testimony fodder for evangelistic events. If anything, they wanted to encourage and re-educate local churches to support 'incarnational' approaches to sport.

Second, chaplains saw team performance as off limits. Most, for instance, said they wouldn't pray for team success. Work with players should encompass – if not focus on – those on the side-lines as much as those on the pitch (as with the chaplain who, rather than celebrating with the team after promotion went and spent time with an injured player in hospital). This lay at the heart of the distinction between the work of sport psychologists and chaplains.[5] Their roles bear a superficial similarity, in that they focus on the internal well-being of players. Sports psychologist, however, were concerned with match preparedness and performance, not so the chaplain. As one player said, "It's about more than football... it's their family. A psychologist has to get the best of the player on the pitch. The chaplain has to get the best of the player for his life. The chaplain has to be strong. Forget the football... ask the questions that relate to life."

This division of labour – and their freedom from concerns around performance – helped chaplains work closely with other welfare and support staff, and was ultimately seen as absolutely central in creating the possibility of any trust between players and chaplains.

That said, this chaplain observed that close attention to the holistic welfare of players was not insignificant to their performance. He told the story of a high value signing for the club who wasn't performing. The manager happened to mention that he thought not enough effort was being put in – that he regretted signing him. The chaplain spoke to him at a training session and discovered the player was suffering with some domestic difficulties – he persuaded the player to go and see the manager, who gave him a break to resolve his personal problems, allowing him to come back for an "excellent" second half of the season.

Third, chaplains didn't see themselves as well positioned to challenge or critique the overarching values of a club or of players. They were conscious of their dependence on the goodwill of the club and players, and also of their need to win trust amongst players. There was no discussion of what a theological engagement with sporting structures might mean, but rather a pragmatic sense that this was an opportunity to serve a community of people.

At times, this provoked a sense of dissonance amongst chaplains – one mentioned overhearing a conversation about cars amongst a number players, spending around £50,000 each. He knew that the groundsman hadn't been given budget to replace a small tractor at the cost of £12,000.

> That's not very kingdom... I don't know what to do about that. It's not my job to instruct people how to set budgets. I'm there to be 'different', which hopefully is something people mention. I hope we offer a counter-culture, something subversive.

One chaplain warned against a moralistic response to sport, which either exaggerates either its ethical failings or achievements. "Sport is no different really from the rest of society, have to be very careful not to judge people or put them on a pedestal".

> For example, the Rugby League code of conduct talks a lot about family values – can challenge events which seem to run contrary to that. For example, when the club went into administration and weren't treating

> the staff properly he spoke up. All happened behind closed doors, not necessarily seen by everyone – but it happens.

Returning to the theological picture

Overall, chaplains are enthusiastic about the possibility for extending and developing their work, and convinced of the pastoral need. To the extent that we were able to talk about chaplaincy with others – club staff, for instance – it was highly valued, and chaplains themselves were highly regarded.

The key for a chaplain is to establish credibility and trust amongst senior management, players and staff – as one put it, "It's all about relationships and trust built up over time".

This is partly a matter of who he or she is. There was a general sense that the role required a particular kind of individual, not fulfilling dog-collar stereotypes, comfortable with people that didn't share their faith, pastorally sensitive and skilled, able to relate to athletes and sit comfortably in a sporting context, but not an ardent fan who simply wanted to hang around with his or her favourite players. It was also a matter of holding the tension of being "part of the inner workings of the club, but not of them". It undoubtedly made it easier for the chaplain if they were established within the club (the rapid churn amongst playing staff did mean that, within a relatively short space of time, they could, relatively speaking, become part of the furniture), but that 'establishment' ought only ever to be provisional. Content to serve the club, they should not serve its sporting aims – it should serve the club as a human association of people made in the image of God. One chaplain put it like this.

> You know supporters generally place a value on players based on what they get from them. They will value them if they play well, if they score, if they win. My value system comes from God's value of them, which is they're created in his image, precious and valuable to him, loved by him and that's the basis on which I can relate to them. I think they see me as someone who has an unconditional love for them.

How then, do we square what might look like the failure of a response like sport chaplaincy to offer any kind of theological critique of the structures which they serve? Our interviews spoke in the idiom of pastoral needs and player welfare, not in ludic diffusion or the idolatry of sport. Like chaplains in other theologically controversial

institutions (for instance, military chaplains), is there a risk of compromise with systems that are in some fundamentally broken?

It is true that chaplains do not come with theological guns blazing. To do so would quickly invalidate their work in the eyes of those with whom they need to win trust. There is sufficient in their work to suggest that they offer a kind of gentle iconoclasm, subtly eroding the broken worship of sporting idols. As they "forget the football" – or the rugby, or the horse racing, or whatever it may be – and help the player in question do the same, and as they "ask the questions that relate to life" they do offer a counter-culture.

Christian athletes, sports ministry organisations, chaplains and academics are increasingly seeking to reflect theologically on what it is to become a faithful presence, simultaneously inhabiting and affirming yet challenging the sporting world. Nick Watson draws on Walter Brueggemann for a theological analogy – one which connects usefully to the welfare concerns that many chaplains will be faced with on an ongoing basis; the anxiousness induced by the pressure to perform. Ministry organisations, argues Watson, should act like what Brueggemann calls the 'local tradition'. Like the exiled Jews in Babylon – they should actively resist the imperialistic self-indulgent greed, pride, power and arrogance of the empire, in this instance – the empire of sport.

> The local tradition, which stands in deep tension with the empire, knows the denial cannot finally cover over the reality... [of] anxiety... The congregation of the local tradition, having inhaled so much imperial air, is itself slow and reluctant to realise what has been entrusted to it... Such a congregation is tempted to collude with and accommodate itself to the loud, insistent practices of the empire. At best, however, the congregation, funded by the local tradition, knows better... it tells an alternative and opposing story to that of the empire centred on the covenant with YHWH.[6]

We will turn now to consider how this theological vision can take practical shape.

Endnotes

1. Sports Chaplaincy UK – originally called SCORE (Sports Chaplains Offering Resources and Encouragement) – was established in 1991 by John Boyers, a Baptist minister who

had spent 15 years as a chaplain at Watford FC, and then at Manchester United. It seeks to enhance and maintain the quality of sport chaplaincy and also to develop it, both in terms of its reach but also in terms of its integration with both professional bodies and churches.

2. David Chawner, http://www.urbantheology.org/journals/journal-3-1/a-reflection-on-the-practice-of-sports-chaplaincy
3. Jeffrey Heskins and Matt Baker, *Footballing Lives: As Seen by Chaplains in the Beautiful Game*, Norwich Canterbury Press (2006).
4. The Taranaki Rugby Immersion Programme http://www.taranaki-rugby.co.nz/uploaded_files/VT0260-Emerging-Rugby-Programme-email.pdf
5. We should not draw hard and fast distinctions, but there is a clear difference of emphasis between psychologists and chaplains, as well as a difference in the scope of their work (i.e., player focus v. club community). For a deeper evaluation, see Richard Gamble, Denise Hill and Andrew Parker, '"Revs and Psychos": Impact and Interaction amongst Sport Chaplains and Sport Psychologists in English Premiership Football', *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 25 (2): 249-264.
6. Walter Brueggeman, *Out of Babylon*, quoted in Watson and Parker, '*Mapping the Field*', p. 25.

Conclusions and recommendations

In Danny Boyle's vibrant opening ceremony for the London 2012 Olympics, the most impressive moment was Akram Khan's muted dance, accompanied by Emeli Sandé's rendition of *Abide With Me.*

In stark contrast to the rest of Boyle's clever, confident, colourful and humorous exploration of Britishness, Boyle had given Khan a one word brief: mortality. In a ceremony otherwise full of light, music and breath-taking physicality, the dance was dimly lit and tense. Banal TV commentary cast it as a memorial for those who had died in the 7/7 London attacks. For those with eyes to see and ears to hear, however, the moment posed a quiet question against Olympic self-confidence of human physical prowess – what about death?

Swift to its close ebbs out life's little day;
Earth's joys grow dim; its glories pass away;
Change and decay in all around I see;
O Thou who changest not, abide with me.

The moment was a redemptive one for the ceremony, which was otherwise tinged with International Olympic Committee's quazi-religious symbolism. It was a reminder or our limits and contingencies, and that for all of sport's transcendent possibilities, it is circumscribed by our creatureliness. It is a paradigm for what Christian's should offer sport – the freedom, even in small ways, for it to be itself.[1]

In our first section, we gave a snapshot of theological engagement with sport. The affirming notion of 'play' is its centre of gravity, though this has been developed in different directions. The loss of a sense of play is theology's concern. The transcendent possibility of play means that it lends itself to a form of idolatry, becoming a source of ultimate meaning for players and spectators alike. This, we argue, is at the root of what seems to be the increasing ethical disorder of sport and sporting institutions.

In our second section, we explored whether this account could be mapped onto the experience of players. We found that they did experience a kind of ludic diffusion, often through exposure to the high expectations of fans – so seriously is sport taken, that failure is feared. It's easy for athletes to find their own sense of identity and purpose in

sport – again, both anxiety and bad conduct can reside in the fear of failure. Christian athletes, we suggested, were able to tap a sense that success in their field was not their primary task or duty. They were a person first – and all that meant in terms of their relationship to God and others – and an athlete second.

In our third section, we turned to the work of sports chaplains as an authentic Christian response to the world of sport. We noted the significant welfare needs that they encountered amongst players and staff, and that they argued that their independence from club structures was vital to the ways in which they built trust with players. The care was person centred, and not rooted in the success of the team or the individual on the pitch.

Though their theological voice is in some ways muted, we suggested that chaplains offer a kind of gentle iconoclasm. Their presence is a symbol that a sporting vocation can be affirmed, but that sporting success should not be idolised. Chaplains, we concluded, represent an alternative narrative to the narrative of anxiety, and in this way represent an authentic Christian engagement with sport. Though they are not missionaries, their work is missional; not proselytism, but 'evangelical'. Welfare and pastoral concerns could not be easily divorced from one another, indeed they should be kept closely together.

We might ask, in closing, what the Christian athletes – and indeed, Christian spectators – might do to suggest that there is another narrative to that of sporting anxiety. Most Christian athletes have decided, for instance, that there's no problem with them playing on Sundays. But the concept of 'Sabbath' is a circumscription on the totalising demands of work. We do not argue here for a return to 'moralism' – over play on a Sunday or on any other issue – but to imagine ways in which players and spectators alike can draw a line, giving sport the freedom to be what it is, not what it's not.

Endnotes

1. Disability sport and the Paralympic movement could be said to perform a similar function, chastening elite/able bodied sport for its valorisation of physical perfection which turns out, after all, not to be essential to sport. For interested readers, an important new collection is due for publication this year – Nick Watson and Andrew Parker (eds), *Sports, Religion and Disability* London: Routledge (2014), or see Nick Watson, 'Sport, Disability and the Olympics', *Bible in Transmission*, Bible Society, Spring 2012. http://www.biblesociety.org.uk/uploads/content/bible_in_transmission/files/2012_spring/BiT_Spring_2012_Watson.pdf

A sporting decalogue

What does all that mean, practically speaking? As a provocation, we offer the following sporting decalogue – a Ten Commandments of Sport in the 21st Century.

1. Don't take sport too seriously – it shouldn't be the source of your identity.
2. Don't make sporting idols. Players are human beings, not gods. Perfection isn't the essence of sport.
3. Don't try to say that God is on your side.
4. Do things that are nothing to do with sport. The best of your time belongs to God, your family and your neighbour.
5. Honour your competitor – there's no game without them.
6. Play to win, but not at any cost. Sport is not more important than the people that play it. It is not good to behave on the pitch or track in ways that it is bad to behave in the street.
7. Don't deliberately harm your body or anyone else's.
8. Acknowledge that you or your team will sometimes lose, and that failure is as important as success.
9. Don't abuse or attack the player on the basis of their race, nationality, sexuality. Talk about the performance, not the person.
10. Find a sport you love to play, and play it. Play for the sake of the game, not for what it can give you.

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