

## 22/6/2014. *Sport*

The World Cup is under way in football (although England are already out!), the Test cricket season is on, the national rugby team is playing against the All Blacks down under, Andy Murray begins his title defence at Wimbledon tomorrow, and in two weeks the Tour de France cycle race – won at last by Brits in 2012 and 2013 – begins here before crossing the English Channel. What view should Christians take of sport?

Sport is possible only where people have time and/or leisure. It began in ancient Greece, where the wealthy had slaves, and where the athletes (who competed naked) might have private sponsors. The ancient Greeks invented most of the individual sports in track and field athletics, which featured in the original Olympic Games. Roman gladiatorial games were a more violent and spectacular version of Greek sports.

There is essentially nothing in the Bible about sport. Sport is recreation and/or entertainment spiced by competition, and the Bible is not about those things. St Paul uses metaphors about athletes when writing to congregations in the Graeco-Roman world, but that is all. In Europe, the Roman Empire spread Graeco-Roman culture and Christianity. There was a day of rest every week, inspired by the Jewish Sabbath modelled on the divine pattern of creation. People often played games on this day, although the Puritans tried to ban them in mid-17th century Britain. (That was a mistake – the Sabbath is a day of rest from your regular work, and fun is partly what God meant it for.) The British invented most team sports, and the aristocrats of 18th century England would raise, pay and bet on their own cricket team against rivals. Match-fixing was rife in those fixtures; it is nothing new. Some time later the Victorians transformed our team sports into great institutions, and the British Empire spread them round the world.

Today sport is professionalised. At the top it is no longer a spare-time pursuit, and if you are good enough you can get to the top in many sports even if you were raised in poverty. Sport often provides a route out of poverty – for boxers in 20th century America (for instance), and for cricketers in India today.

What is the effect on sportsmen of professionalism? If your job is to kick or hit or throw a ball better than other people, so that it dominates your life, then, unless you maintain other interests, your personality is likely to narrow. Sportsmen who retire face a vacuum, and they often experience trouble in adjusting afterwards.

The salaries of many sports stars are astronomical. That has happened because of TV rights. Those salaries are simply the going rate for the job, and if you pay a TV subscription to watch sports then you should not complain, for that is where the big money comes from. Let us be glad that we live in a society in which so many people – not just the wealthy – can afford to pay to watch people bash a ball about. Money nevertheless brings problems (as the Bible warns). Originally, sports clubs were founded by and for players; then they discovered that they could charge the public to come and watch in person; then they found that they could, through intermediaries (TV companies), charge the public to watch remotely. At each step the game has been distanced from the people most committed to it, and the interests of finance have been furthered.

Sporting excellence is like excellence in the arts – in painting or in virtuoso violin playing or theatre acting, for instance – or of fine wine. People discuss a goal or an innings just as others discuss the finer points of paintings, or classical music renditions, or wines. And, just as these things cease to be of interest whenever a nation goes to war, so does sport. (Sportsmen use military metaphors but soldiers never use sporting ones.) In all of these things there is a risk of idolatry, of getting hooked. Sport is particularly susceptible, because it is more tribal than the arts.

Anybody from a traditional culture who watches Olympic opening or closing ceremonies would be in no doubt that these are religious ceremonies, but would not find it easy to identify the god. It is Man. These are religious ceremonies of secular humanism; man is celebrated in his running faster, jumping higher, throwing farther and so on. Who gave him these gifts?

Is it acceptable to pray for your team? God is interested in everything that goes on in his creation, so I suggest that the answer is Yes – provided that you have first prayed for the needs of your family, your friends, your congregation, your town, your nation and the persecuted church. Enjoy sport, but keep it in perspective.