

We all can win the World Cup



On the Lord's Team! A Reflection on Sports Providing an Image of the Christian Life. The World Cup captured a lot of attention these past few weeks. I puzzle a bit as to the popularity of soccer since it seems that almost no one ever scores. A fan corrected me, saying that I sounded like a typical American who cares only about results. He said that most soccer fans appreciate the game for its own sake, for the skill and teamwork involved. All right, I'll accept the judgment I received. I am surely in the minority since a vast percentage of the world deeply appreciates the game. I am also aware of the need to be wary of caring only about results, scores, and winning. There is, or should be, more to sports than scoring and winning.

However, I am mindful that St. Paul used the image of an athlete to describe the Christian life in several places and he did talk about winning. Consider this one:

Do you not know that the runners in the stadium all run in the race, but only one wins the prize? Run so as to win. Every athlete exercises discipline in every way. They do it to win a perishable crown, but we an imperishable one. Thus I do not run aimlessly; I do not fight as if I were shadowboxing. No, I drive my body and train it, for fear that, after having preached to others, I myself should be disqualified (1 Cor. 9:25-27).

And yet even here it is clear that Paul has more in mind than just winning. Clearly there are many virtues necessary in the athlete that are also essential for the Christian.

Discipline - The athlete must carefully and persistently train the body. Without this discipline he will not master the sport nor will his body have the necessary stamina, strength, and coordination. Athletes train every day and work to perfect their prowess. So too must Christians undertake a clear regimen, diligently training in the ways of faith by praying, reading Scripture, partaking of the Sacraments, modeling moral virtue, and exhibiting self-mastery. The Christian must practice every day.

Persistence - The athlete must be disciplined all the time, not just occasionally. Failing to train

persistently not only jeopardizes good performance, but also risks injury. So too for the Christian. We cannot expect much progress with an on-again, off-again regimen. Without persistent good habits, the Christian not only impedes progress, but also risks injury (sin).

Willingness to obey rules - Every sport has rules that must be accepted and followed. Athletes are not free to reinvent the game. They must play by the rules or risk exclusion and disqualification. So too Christians must play by the rules set forth by God. If we are going to be on the winning team, we have to abide by the rules. To refuse this is to risk being disqualified. We are not free to reinvent Christianity, as so many try to do today. There is only one playing field and one game. Follow the rules or risk being ejected.

Vigilance for signs of injury – Good athletes listen carefully to their bodies, watching for any signs of injury. If they detect an injury they see the team doctor quickly and take measures to heal as quickly as possible. Further they avoid injury by stretching, learning proper form, etc. So too for the Christian. We must monitor ourselves for injury, and upon discovery of even minor injury, we should consult our team physician, the priest, and get on the mend quickly. Further, we should try to ward off injury by learning proper Christian form (moral life) and by avoiding whatever leads us to sin (a kind of stretching to prevent moral injury).

Teamwork - Many sports involve learning to work together toward a goal. Athletes should not seek glory only for themselves; they must have the good of the entire team in mind. They must learn to work with others toward the common good and overcome any idiosyncrasies or selfishness that hinders the common goal. So too Christians must strive to overcome petty and selfish egotism and work for the common good, learning to appreciate the gifts of others. The team is stronger than the individual alone. Life is about more than just me. When others are glorified, so am I—if I am on the same winning team.

Well, you get the point. Why not add a few of your own thoughts on how sports can provide a good metaphor for the Christian life?

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