



THE
MENTORING
PROJECT

THE SPIRIT
OF SPORTS:
ATHLETICS IN THE
CHRISTIAN LIFE



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INTRODUCTION

I'll never forget it. It was near the end of a remarkable day. A day that began with a group of guys enjoying a Los Angeles Dodgers baseball game. A beautiful southern California afternoon, with Dodger dogs and America's pastime, only to be followed up with free tickets to a heavyweight boxing match around the corner at the Staples Center. Lennox Lewis was to take on Wladimir Klitschko. There we were six or seven rounds into the fight, yelling and cheering and boxing the air as if helping these massive men deliver blow upon blow, when out of the corner of my eye I see an eighty year-old lady, dressed to perfection and hair to match, swinging and screaming as passionately as the rest of us. That is sports. It catches almost everyone. It fills stadiums, and it floods streaming services to such levels that athletes are some of the most celebrated and compensated people in our society.

But it's not just the professionals that garner such attention and such zeal. Trot down to the little league park and watch otherwise sane individuals lose their voice over little Johnny's four-base error that we like to call a homerun. There is no denying it. Sports have a grip on our world, and it's not letting up anytime soon. From T-ball to pickleball, sports are everywhere in our culture. We play them, we watch them, and we argue with our friends about them. It is tempting to consider this a modern day phenomenon, but this is nothing new. Athletics have been a significant part of life and culture dating back to the eighth century BC with the Olympic or Panhellenic Games. Successful athletes have been revered and rewarded in cultures for millennia, and the idea of competition permeates every tribe, tongue, and nation.

But how is the follower of Christ to think about sports? If athletics are everywhere and if we are to do all to the glory of God, how do we consider sports?

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As the Apostle Paul exhorts us, we should not simply follow the world because something is permissible. The Christ follower should evaluate each and every aspect of life and endeavor to establish a life that is most pleasing to the King. With this in mind, and eternity in play, where do sports fit in? Are they an unnecessary distraction, a divine gift, or like most of life, an opportunity to worship well or to worship poorly?

This field guide will examine several of the benefits and some of the dangers of athletics in the life of a follower of Christ. The guide is broken down into offense (benefits), defense (dangers), and special teams (discussions of travel ball, college scholarships, church softball, etc.). With sports being such a significant part of our culture, it is worth a serious discussion.

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OFFENSE

There is no question that sports bring certain benefits to society, and I would argue to the Christian community as well. The Apostle Paul himself uses the athlete as a positive illustration of one who strives for a prize. Alongside the farmer and the soldier, the athlete is presented as a worthy picture; a model of discipline, fortitude, and determination. True, the eternal prize is the far better reward, and the pursuit of Christ is the far more important race, but the athlete is not shamed by Paul, but rather put forward as an appropriate picture.

Why is this, and would Paul recommend athletics for the believer today? While I'm not certain what Paul's recommendation would be when it comes to sports, I believe there are at least three significant areas where athletics offer benefits in the life of the Christian: a believer's health, character, and witness.

Health

The first and perhaps most obvious benefit of athletics is the boost in health. There is no question that our culture is becoming less and less active. We are far more stationary than our ancestors ever were, and the change has come quickly. Even a generation ago kids played outside, couples walked, and more and more people exercised as a part of life, not an addition to it. Obesity rates have skyrocketed, and the dependence on medicine is at an all-time high.

Technology has added countless comforts to our lives, but the tradeoff is an out of shape and unhealthy society. Children and adults alike are spending less time in activity and more time off their feet and in front of a screen. Even as I type I can feel my body collapsing.

The Apostle Paul tells the church at Corinth that he “disciplines (his) body and makes it (his) slave.” The same mentality should hold true for all who follow Paul as he follows Christ. Our bodies are not neutral in this life, and if we are to walk well spiritually, we will need to do some regular walking too.

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Science has long been fascinated with the connections between our physical and our mental health and, as believers, we understand that our spiritual health is inextricable from our mental health as well. Secular studies have shown that regular exercise decreases depression, distraction, anxiety, and gives an overall boost in mood. Our physical health influences our mental health, and our mental health is directly tied to our spiritual health as well. If our bodies are not healthy, it affects the way we think, and the way we think drives our spiritual walk.

Sin is not absent when people are physically well, but being physically sick makes it all the more difficult to be spiritually faithful. In general, people need to exercise, and sports can help.

Sports give us reason and opportunities to better our health. I have learned that I am not alone when it comes to exercise. Most people prefer to exercise in a sport, or in preparation for a sport. The regular buffeting of my body becomes a lot easier when a ball and a team are involved. Working toward a more defined and concrete goal, such as a triathlon race or trying to make the high school football team adds much needed motivation to early morning workouts or discipline with dessert. There is also the added accountability and encouragement of others around us to push us out of bed or through that extra rep in the weight room, or to run that extra lap.

Not only do sports assist in physical health, recreation itself is a helpful break from the regular weights of the responsibilities of school, work, and family, and provides a time to reset and recharge mentally for what lies ahead. Whether recreationally or competitively, sports help disciples of Christ pursue a healthy life.

Character

The second and arguably most substantial strength of athletics in the life of the believer is the character it exposes and the character it builds. Sports provide unique stressors and stages that life outside of sports often does not, and if one is purposeful, these stages can accelerate our growth into the image of Christ. We must anticipate and not be surprised by the sinfulness that will be exposed in training and in the heat of competition. Sports raises the temperature and exposes the impurities, and we must be ready and willing to address them. The range of character traits that athletics engage is broader than this guide has space to examine, so we will focus on just three of the most impressive sets of traits highlighted in sports.

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1. *Humility and Selflessness*

The first character trait that is easily visible and incredibly helpful is selflessness. The Bible calls us to prefer others in life, and team sports gives ample opportunity to expose our natural resistance to such preference and great practice in deferring. A good player is one who does what is best for the team's success; this translates well into the home and the church as we are all called to look out for the good of others and to see others as more important than ourselves (Phil. 2:3–4).

This outward expression of selflessness comes from an inner place of humility and a resistance to pride. Pride is a sin common to all mankind; one could even argue that pride is in fact the mother of all sins. Pride and humility are often cloaked and quiet in everyday life, but in the arena of athletics they do battle in plain sight.

We tend to think about pride in its more visible and vocal form. We think of the beating of the chest, the shouts of “I’m the greatest” and trash talking. But pride is far more pervasive than that. It is not relegated to the extrovert or the diva. Pride, at its core, is our desire to see or present ourselves in a better light. That can be accomplished in at least two ways. We can seek to draw attention to ourselves when successful, or we can run from the spotlight in fear of failure. A young basketball player who shoots too much may be driven by his or her desire to be seen, but the other young player on the court who shoots too little is often driven by his or her desire *not* to be seen when they fail. One shoots so everyone can see them make it; one doesn’t shoot so no one will see them miss. Both athletes are caught in the grip of worldly comparison and the fear of man. Both are hindered by pride, and sports can expose it in ways other areas of life cannot.

In fact, there may be no better place than on the court, field, or pitch to expose this cancer rooted within us. But a common and unintended casualty in the battle against pride is confidence, as if the answer to arrogance is a denial of ability. But the believer should know better. Pride is not merely the mistake of overestimating one’s ability, but misidentifying the source of that ability. Pride says “look at me” when I hit a homerun, while humility says, “Everything I have is a gift, why should I boast?” Pride finds the source of success within, while godly confidence sees everything — from speed, to hand-eye coordination, to even a strong work ethic — as a gift from above. Sports doesn’t allow someone to simply back away from his or her abilities, or downplay it with a measure of false humility. It requires people to use their abilities and skills for the betterment of the team. An arrogant and self-centered athlete is a detriment, and to become a great athlete one must be confident but not arrogant. The same is true in

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life outside of sports. Confidence is critical and arrogance is destructive in work, in the home, in the church, and in the community. If we can learn this on the field we will be much better in the family. The home doesn't need a father who lacks confidence, but it does need a man who has humility. The church doesn't need members who believe they have nothing to offer, the church needs members who use their gifts and thank God for giving them.

We would all do well to take Paul's words to heart when he reminds us, "What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?" (1 Cor. 4:7). Sports is a great training ground to learn confident humility, and that humility will produce selflessness, and selflessness will bring success whether on the field, in the church or in the home.

2. Leadership

Another fantastic feature of team sports is the opportunity for men and women to practice and grow in leadership. This is true even in the case of youth sports. Young men and women often lack environments in which to lead, and sports can provide a venue in a less serious situation. A ten year-old little leaguer may have no young sibling or no occasion to take the reins, but when playing in the nine and ten year-old division he has opportunity to encourage, exhort, and model for the younger players.

As athletes grow older and the stakes grow higher, leadership becomes more and more important. Good coaches see this as an opportunity to instill lifelong leadership lessons in their players, so that when they are off the field they are better able to lead in life.

While much of leadership is found in modeling the right attitude and effort, there are communication skills and other soft skills learned in sports that are invaluable to the Christian walk. Learning to communicate in such a way that people respond well and want to follow is an essential element of good leadership. Listening to input or frustrations from teammates before making decisions prepares one to lead in the home, the church, and the community. Leadership in the church and the home requires much of the same patience and sacrificial preference that one can learn on the field. The truth is, leadership isn't easy, and it is a huge asset to be able to practice difficult decisions and the daily grind of setting a good example when failure has fewer consequences. Good teammates make good leaders.

Sports not only fosters leaders in the athletes that play, but in coaches as well. Coaching is a great place to learn important leadership skills and

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to expose some of our own sinful tendencies that often appear dormant in everyday life. Not only that, Christian men and women can have incredible influence in the community and can be beacons for godliness and the gospel when they grab a clipboard and take up coaching. Few roles outside of the home and the church have more influence than a coach. How many times has a coach said the same thing as mom or dad, and yet the young athlete hears and responds better to the coach than the parent? Coaching is a powerful privilege, and Christian coaches can capitalize on this reality to make an impact not just in the community, but in the kingdom.

3. *Perseverance and Discipline*

Discipline and delayed gratification are at the core of almost all athletic training. Workouts and skill development are rigorous, monotonous, and often alone. The ability to do hard things without immediate reward is a quality fundamental to a fruitful life. These are qualities all young men and women need to develop, and in our culture it often has to be manufactured. Few of us are rising before the sun to milk cows and plow fields, and even fewer young children are forced into the kind of discipline that much of mankind faced naturally throughout history. Instead, we have learned instant gratification, food delivery, and comfortable ways of life. So how do we fight against such softness? What better way to build perseverance in children (and adults for that matter) than through sports? On countless mornings, my children have risen with the sun to go to the gym, the weight room, or the practice field. With sleep in their eyes and comfort left under the covers, they face hard things over and over and over again.

The believer benefits not only from the training and preparation necessary for athletics, but the grit and perseverance in the midst of competition is incredible training for life outside the lines. The commitment to get up and compete again after a loss or a major setback has direct application to the Christian walk. While Paul ranks growth in godliness far above physical progress, he does acknowledge that physical training is beneficial (1 Tim. 4:8). In fact, Paul describes his overall approach to self-control and self-discipline in athletic terms:

Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified. (1 Cor. 9:25–27)

The Christian life is a tough one, and learning how to do hard things and

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the willingness to press on despite disappointment and failure are critical marks of those who want to be like Christ.

There is another aspect to physical training that is especially beneficial for young men. The physical contact and strength training in some sports that was originally designed to mimic battle, is good preparation for man, since he is called to protect his home and those who cannot protect themselves. This is an often overlooked advantage, but communities need husbands, fathers, and sons to stand up against evil and to protect the innocent. Sports gives men an appropriate environment to develop and maintain the physical abilities to be the protectors and providers God expects.

Relationships

One of the great assets of athletics is the opportunity to be with people. Whether gospel opportunities or Christian fellowship, sports puts us with people in a way much of life does not. Many Christians find it difficult to engage the lost in their communities. Neighborhoods are less and less neighborly, and there seem to be fewer opportunities to build relationships for the gospel. Sports, however, can be an effective way to engage the community around you. People from different walks of life and different faiths come together when it comes to sports.

It is far easier to strike up a conversation sitting in the bleachers watching an hour-long soccer match than it is catching your neighbor walking the trash to the curb. This goes for the athlete as well. If a believer is playing on a team with unbelievers, there are scores of opportunities between bus rides, workouts, and team meals to have meaningful conversations.

Christians should see local athletics as fields white for the harvest and should prayerfully consider how to best engage the lost. Start by praying for the families on your team's roster and consider hosting a team meal or an end-of-season party. Having families into your own home not only demonstrates hospitality and deepens friendships, it allows them to have a glimpse into a Christian home. In this setting, you can pray for the meal, model serving, and often ask more personal questions than you can in the bleachers.

Many of these relationships extend beyond one season, and it is not strange for players to spend years together. This provides the evangelist extended time and opportunity to develop friendships and demonstrate the love of Christ in a variety of ways. Christian coaches have even more occasion to model Christlike character and to point athletes to the goodness of God's ways. As a coach of a baseball all-star team, I have preached the gospel to

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players, parents, and grandparents in hotel lobbies and conference rooms on more than one occasion.

Time with other believers can also be a side benefit of sports. It is impossible to build strong relationships without time together. Christian athletes or families that play together can truly expedite discipleship and better facilitate true biblical fellowship because of the time together that comes with athletics. I have witnessed men in my own church use a round of golf or innings on the bench in church softball games to engage other men in discipleship conversations. Whatever the relationships, Christians should be purposeful and take full advantage of the time and conversations that accompany our sports culture.

Whether you eat a hot dog in the stands with a brother in Christ or pray over pizza in the parking lot with a group of unbelievers, do all to the glory of God.

Discussion and Reflection:

1. What would you consider to be the greatest advantages of sports?
2. What is the difference between confidence and arrogance, and how would the Bible help us navigate the mindset for success?
3. What are creative ways to capitalize on the opportunities that sports present?
4. What are some ways that you have seen Christians take advantage of athletics?

2

DEFENSE

I wish that sports were only positive, but like most things this world offers, athletic competition has inherent dangers as well. The power and ever-present nature of sports makes it an incredible tool, but one that, if not handled carefully, can cause serious damage. The Christian athlete should be keenly aware of the threats and temptations that sports present so as to avoid them while taking advantage of the benefits athletics bring.

Identity

Perhaps the gravest danger in sports is misplaced identity. Whether being picked last in kickball, or trying to make the hall of fame, the temptation to find our value, worth, and even our identity in a game we play is a strong one. As children made in the image of God and being conformed into the image of his Son, anchoring our identity in anything or anyone other than the one who made and saves us is the foundation of foolishness.

The amount of time and resources given to sports creates a natural gravitational pull for identity. Surely this is not only true of sports, but whatever it is that draws your time, money, and attention is dangerously close to drawing your identity. But with so much investment in athletics and so much attention given to it in our society, the pull is overly strong. Countless hours of practice, training, and travel gives sports a boost in lobbying for the throne. Our money not only reveals what is important to us, Jesus says where we invest actually moves our hearts in that direction: “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matt. 6:21).

Not only does the investment in sports create an enormous temptation to find one’s identity in athletics, the competition itself does too. Competing is comparing, and as such, comparison is ever present in sports. From batting averages to PRs in swimming, the competitive nature of sports brings with it constant evaluation against others. We know from Scripture and from experience that comparison all too often leads to pride. Even the most mature disciples struggle with the pride found in comparison. James and John argued over who was the greatest disciple. People in Corinth argued over who was the greatest preacher, and as absurd as it sounds when you say it out loud, we can take great pride in being a better

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pickleball player than our neighbor.

On the flip side, comparison can also lead to depression and heartbreak when we fail. If our identity is rooted in the sports we play, when our individual or team performances don't meet our expectations, we are rocked to the core and have no anchor to hold. Some athletes put in thousands upon thousands of hours in training and make serious sacrifices in diet and social engagement only to fall short of their intended goal. This can be devastating, and if the athlete's identity is in that sport, their joy and satisfaction goes missing along with the goal.

In fact, even in victory an athlete often encounters the vanity of worldly gains. So common is this letdown that terms like "Post-Olympic Depression" have been coined to describe the disappointment of gold medal athletes after the anthems play. Over 27% of medal-winning athletes in the Olympics have reported severe depression following the games. From Missy Franklin to Caleb Dressel to Michael Phelps, gold medal swims did not satisfy like they thought. Dressel, after winning five gold medals in Tokyo in 2020, found himself dwelling, not on the victories, but on the times he did not make: "And that's not fair to myself. That's not fair at all...Like, I just won five gold medals on the biggest world stage in sports, and I'm thinking about how I wish I would've gone faster in certain events."¹ Athletes whose identity is linked to the sport they play will ultimately realize that the sport is not strong enough to hold their identity and purpose. Like Solomon said in Ecclesiastes, the little league trophy and Olympic gold alike will be gone with the wind. Sports not only tempt us in the moment, but they tempt us over time. Statistics are relentless reminders of our performance in comparison to others. Attach your identity to a shooting percentage, 100-meter time, or win total, and you are creating a monster that cannot be satisfied.

In light of this, sports psychology has become a big business, as coaches and general managers try to help players handle success and failure in sports. But this is a difficult if not impossible task if one's identity is found in the sport itself. However, a Christian athlete is best suited to weather the ups and downs of competition as his or her identity is firmly rooted in Christ. Interestingly, many Christian athletes display Philippians 4:13 on their person during games, making public testimony to their trust in the strength of Christ. We must be careful, however, to recognize that the strength mentioned in that passage isn't applied to winning in life, but to handling the wins and losses. The text is on contentment and as such is a great reminder for the Christian athlete, that win or lose, our joy is secure in Christ.

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Investment

As mentioned above, the heavy investment in sports can make it challenging not to put one's identity in them, but there is a more direct danger in the dollars and days spent on sports. Our money and our time are given by God as a stewardship and we are called to manage them well. It is an enormous challenge to find a faithful balance in athletics when it comes to our resources. Both time and money are limited commodities for everyone on the planet, and sports will cry out for more of both.

Sports take time. While games only require a set and usually short amount of time, the preparation and training for those games is far more. Hours upon hours are given to practice and training before the bright lights even come on. We must be careful to consider and to stay in control of the time spent on athletics and weigh it in light of our other responsibilities. Our schedules and the investment of our time reflects our priorities and if not diligent, sports can eat up our entire calendar. Sports take time and if one doesn't stay strong, it will take too much.

Sports also take money. Most sports entail some sort of financial investment to simply participate. Whether registering for a softball league or green fees for a round of golf, most sports aren't free. In fact, many sports can be expensive, and the expense around travel ball is at another level altogether and will be discussed later.

Beyond registration, new equipment also offers a chance for athletes to spend money. That new driver or swimsuit promises to help you hit it farther and swim faster. The athlete is always tempted to invest more and more into the sports they love and, if not careful, will spend an inordinate and unhelpful amount on the equipment to play. This is true from tee-ball to the senior tees. We never age out of the lure of new equipment. We should regularly remind ourselves that last year's model worked really well for athletes just last year. The old adage "it's not the arrow, it's the Indian" holds true. Rarely is the new equipment the difference maker it promises to be. Far more important is the skill of the one holding it. That being said, even if spending on sports makes one better, the believer should ask if the cost is worth it.

The Christ follower should regularly evaluate time and financial investment when it comes to sports and be willing to shift priorities if and when they get out of line. We are to be stewards of what we have been given, and the time and treasures we have are not our own but should be used to glorify God.

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Influence

While sports offer us opportunities to engage with the world in evangelism, it also creates an occasion for the world to influence us as well. Unless we are talking about church softball, the numbers are normally stacked against believers when they participate in sports. In this world, such interaction is inevitable, and if we are going to engage faithfully in the Great Commission, it is a must — but it does create a field for danger. Immature believers can often be swayed by the negative culture around them, and the locker room is just such a place. To guard against this, followers of Christ should remember whom they represent and be prepared for the world and its ways. Simple acknowledgment and readiness is often enough to minimize the corruption that comes from worldly company, but other measures can be taken in addition to guard our walks.

It will help tremendously if the follower of Christ can see sports as part of his mission rather than something separate from it. Seeing the community of sports as a field ripe for the harvest is not only good for evangelism, it helps us stand against the culture the world brings.

In youth athletics, the influence of a dugout or locker room can have disastrous effects. Parents must be intentional and proactive when it comes to discussing matters with their children and should ask tough questions about what is being said and done. Parents need to be aware of the immense amount of time and exposure young athletes have to the world and must counter that with quality (and quantity) time in the church and the home. Parents tend to be naïve about the amount of sinful influence on their children and the age it begins. This problem has only increased with the introduction of smartphones and social media. Parents and players alike should be vigilant to look for, flee from, and protect from earthly temptation at all costs.

Not only is there danger in direct sinful influence when it comes to sports culture, the battle for priorities is relentless as well. It is an uphill battle to make the home and church the child's community when so much time and energy is spent with the team. This is a particular problem with travel sports, but that will be discussed later. Parents cannot be neutral when it comes to the significant influence the sports environment brings and must plan regular discussions and evaluations with their sons and daughters.

One means of mitigating against this influence is to have godly parents coach and help lead youth athletics. From six-year-old basketball to Friday night lights, my kids have had the privilege of playing under many Christian coaches who took the responsibility of influence seriously, and

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my kids are far better for it. Pray for and seek out godly coaches for your children, and if none are available, consider coaching yourself. I have coached dozens of seasons in multiple sports through four children and it has afforded me more time and influence than if I had handed them over to someone else.

Whatever the choice, the follower of Christ must recognize and plan according to the influences that are around them. Jesus did not intend for us to be removed from the world, but he does expect us to live differently than the world. Without an active and biblical approach, the world will be more of an influence on us than we are on the world.

Discussion and Reflection:

1. What would you consider to be the greatest weakness of sports?
2. Why should the believer carefully consider the time and financial commitments related to athletics?
3. How does one guard against putting too much of their identity in the sports that he/she plays?
4. How can we protect ourselves and our children from the ungodliness that flows naturally in the world?

3

SPECIAL TEAMS

Travel Ball

As the parents of athletes you will immediately be faced with the question of travel sports. “Travel ball” has developed into a \$39 billion dollar industry² and continues to grow each year. The teams get younger and younger and the scope of play grows bigger and bigger.

After my third son finished his first all-star tournament at seven years old, I knew what was coming. The team was an exceptional group of kids, and the core of that team went on to come in second in the Pony League World Series at ten years old. As another father and I walked over to talk with the coaches, I told him, “they are going to want to start a travel team with this bunch,” and sure enough, not five minutes into the conversation of how well these young men played, the idea of a travel team was born. I shook my head and smiled at the other dad.

The appeal of travel ball is obvious. It offers more opportunity for improvement, more time with friends, more time for parents to watch their children play, often better competition, and down the road more visibility to college coaches. There is no doubt that travel sports offer these benefits and more, but what is less obvious perhaps are the downsides. The risks aren’t necessarily different than with sports in general, just amplified immensely. For instance, the investment in a little league rec season might be \$150 and two or three nights a week during a three-month season. But travel baseball financial commitment is in the thousands, from initial team registration to multiple uniforms, swag and parent merchandise, to the gas, tickets, meals, and hotels associated with the individual tournaments. This significant financial investment then begs for more time investment as well. If you are going to spend all that money, the team better be good.

Multiply this investment in multiple kids and you have a tectonic shift in the home. Youth athletics now has the greatest gravitational pull and all other activities and responsibilities take a back seat. Without serious preventative measures, this makes children the center of the home and creates an unhealthy and unbiblical structure for the family. With most travel tournaments on the weekend, church involvement is set aside not

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only for the player, but the parents as well. Sunday after Sunday is spent on the field or in the gym instead of gathering with God's people. I have watched many good and faithful parents frustrated at this pull away from fellowship, and have heard many say they would have committed to much less travel ball if they could do it over again.

One final caution when it comes to travel ball is actually related to performance. Even if athletic success was the only goal, I caution parents about the net gain of travel sports. Experience and testimony of college coaches has informed me that years of travel sports can actually have adverse effects on performance. Injuries increase when the same sport is played over extended periods of time, especially through key growing years. Pitchers only have so many throws in their arm, and many have been exhausted before finishing high school. It's not just physical fatigue but competitive fatigue as well. The sheer number of games and the abundance of swag that comes with travel sports makes high school athletics far less exciting and can temper players' competitive fire. Add to that the very nature of travel sports, which encourages players or parents who are not satisfied with their role or playing time to simply switch teams instead of compete for their spot. Travel sports definitely provides additional reps and experience, but that experience does not come without a cost.

To be clear, there are positives to playing on travel teams, but the believer should carefully evaluate the costs before jumping in. Each family needs to make its own decisions when participating in sports in general, and travel ball is no exception.

Chasing Scholarships

One of the common assumptions of travel sports is that the payoff at the end will be worth it. Yet I cannot quantify the amount of disappointment I have seen at the end of high school careers. Not because of poor individual performance or team failure, but because of a lack of collegiate attention or scholarship offers. Parents and students alike are discouraged and even embarrassed by unmet expectations in the recruitment process. The main part of this problem goes back to the concept of identity. Parents should not anchor their son's or daughter's identity, and players should not place even their athletic identity in the ability to obtain an offer or scholarship to play collegiate athletics.

Scholarships are rare, and your young athlete is probably not good enough. I don't say this to be mean, but mathematical. Most of the people reading this guide are not or do not have children who are college level

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athletes and that is okay. Let them enjoy little league, middle school, or high school sports without the burden of making the next level.

For those who do get college offers, rarely are they to the school or division level that they desire, or for the amount they expect. Most scholarships are partial and very, very few athletes make division one sports, where the money is.³ However, since the pressure of evaluating one's athletic career is foolishly gauged by their playing at the next level, athletes and parents will embrace a school they never would have apart from sports. I have regularly watched athletes go to colleges they'd never heard of before recruiting or to schools with much smaller crowds and lesser facilities than high school offered.

Now, there is nothing wrong with going to a small school to play sports and obtain an education. Just be careful that the motivation is not to validate some unspoken assessment or misplaced value in college athletics. I know the temptation is to say, "But my Johnny is different," and maybe he is, but we should at least acknowledge that we all have a strong temptation to view ourselves or our children as better than they are.

I remember to this day being called out of class to come to talk with a recruiter. Now keep in mind, I was only an above average high school football player, nothing special. But in my mind, I walked to the office expecting to see the Alabama coaching staff, when in reality it was an eighty year-old local scout for the Merchant Marine Academy. I say this not to disparage the merchant marines or their football program — it is actually a great school and good football program — I say this to expose the delusion that was in my mind and at some level lives in the minds of most student athletes and their parents.

The Christian should have a better and more honest perspective and be able to trust a good and sovereign God even with his or her athletic future. Work hard and see what the Lord has, but be content. Trust me, tee ball will be more fun for you and your little one if you aren't worried about scouts.

Blurring Genders

The Bible is clear that men and women are different. While both are made in the image of God, his designs for male and female are distinct. In recent years, the cultural push for transgender acceptance has forced its way into the locker room. Biological men are now competing against biological women. The culture is not only denying God's design in gender, but threatening privacy, undermining fair play, and in certain sports even

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putting women in physical danger. This field guide does not have the time or space to dive into this issue further; however, this danger warrants the believer's utmost attention.

But even separate from the transgender issue, the reality of men and women competing poses an interesting and often overlooked danger in athletics. Many who would adamantly fight for the distinct beauty and goodness in God's design in gender often overlook the call of sports to *compete*. No matter the sport, men must compete with masculinity and women must fight to maintain their femininity as well. Certain sports make this more difficult than others, and in some cases it may be prohibitive. Whatever the case, the believer has an obligation not only to maintain, but celebrate God's distinct design in men and women.

Fantasy Sports

What happens if you can't play professional sports? You play fantasy! That's right. Not only do we have to consider actual athletics and the Christian life, but because of its incredible popularity, we must take a moment to consider the spectator sport of speculation: fantasy football, basketball, and baseball.

Fantasy sports has grown exponentially in the last ten years even though it was introduced as early as the 1950s. The advent and prevalence of the internet and the smartphone have boosted fantasy sports into one of the biggest and fastest growing pockets of our society. More than fifty million participants in fantasy sports now fill our homes, our offices, and our churches.

Now, many of the warnings against physical sports hold true to the fantasy world as well. We must not find our identity in our drafts or our finishes, and we should watch out for the company we keep and its influence on us in our various leagues. But the danger of time and money is of particular concern with fantasy. Due to its online nature, it is available twenty-four hours a day. Mock drafts, research, and trading, not to mention the pull to watch each and every game and check on hundreds of performances each and every week, opens the doors to hours upon hours of time devoted to a make-believe competition. Christians must be diligent to make the most of their time and to be disciplined with their schedules.

The danger of money is also a feature of fantasy sports that the follower of Christ should watch. While many fantasy leagues are free to enter and have no wagers involved, fantasy sports has become part of the backbone of the gambling world. There is a consistent temptation to put money on it

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and make a quick dollar. Gambling is not a new danger in the sports world. From the Black Sox Scandal in 1919 World Series all the way back to the Olympic Games in the seventh and eighth centuries B.C., where there is sport, there is gambling. However, with the development of fantasy sports and the proliferation of the internet, sports betting has spread to every corner of the sports world and continues to grow at an alarming rate. The Christian should practice wisdom by knowing and avoiding the temptation of quick riches (Prov. 13:11) and recognizing the addictive nature of gambling that has bankrupted far too many families.

With these warnings in place, the Christian must also recognize that some of the values of sports do show up in fantasy sports as well. It does create a community and comradery across the demographics of the church. It is a natural boost for people of all ages to engage and start conversations and build relationships. Our church has hosted a league the last few years with participants from their teens to their seventies. A high school junior laughing with a retired man in the church over his draft picks lays groundwork for other more significant conversations in the future.

Not all church communities will find fantasy football a helpful tool, but some may. Regardless, the Christian must be aware and proactive in his engagement with sports, even the make believe ones.

Church Softball

One final consideration is sports in the church. I titled the section Church Softball, but this would apply to basketball, flag football, or even kickball (which our church competed in recently). As we have noted many times already, sports are a tool and can be used to build or tear down. If your church sports program is merely an opportunity for young kids or “legends” to lace it up once a week, you are probably missing a great opportunity and may in fact be unhelpful in the long run.

Church sports leagues can have a reputation for quick tempers, trash talking, and an overall lack of godliness. As a result, many churches have considered them taboo. But as mentioned earlier, one of the advantages of athletics is that it exposes sinfulness in ways that other life does not. Pride, self-centeredness, and a lack of self-control are under pressure when the competition kicks in. Instead of spurning this opportunity, I would suggest the church make use of such environments both in evangelism and in discipleship.

Below are a few tips for making the most out of a church sports team:

1. Have a more mature and seasoned believer give oversight to the

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team, whether coaching or simply serving as a monitor and mentor.

2. Talk about the elephant in the room. Understand that competition exposes things we need to work on and make it part of the goal of the team to grow in those areas.
3. Encourage the rest of the church to come and cheer on the team. This will add to the joy of it and also helps temper the tantrums and trash that is talked.
4. If unbelievers are on the team, put in place follow-up conversations with believing players to engage them with the gospel.



CONCLUSION

Back to the beginning. Do sports have a place in the life of the Christian? Absolutely. It provides a great environment to exercise and improve one's health, it encourages growth and development of character, and it allows the believer relational opportunities with believer and unbeliever alike. Many of these benefits are difficult to glean elsewhere in a society filled with so much ease and comfort, and the believer should strongly consider incorporating sports into his or her life for the glory of God.

Do sports also have inherent dangers and intense temptations? Most definitely. So, like many aspects of life, the believer must learn how to walk in wisdom when it comes to athletics.

Often, the more effective the tool, the more careful one must be when using it. Sports is no exception. Like a sharp knife or a powerful saw, sports can serve Christians well, but if careless or cavalier in our handling of sports, people are sure to be injured and the benefits certain to be lost. So consider the arena by all means, ask God how he would have you engage in the world of athletics, and when you do, play ball to the glory of God.



ENDNOTES

1. <https://www.si.com/olympics/2022/04/27/caeleb-dressel-faced-mental-health-struggles-before-tokyo-games>
2. Research indicates travel sports could climb to \$72 billion by 2029. (<https://www.wusa9.com/article/news/investigations/youth-baseball-lake-point-sports-big-buisness-of-youth-sports-snyder-bucks-prime-time-aces/65-8c190607-3e18-4da5-a1c8-b52be3853cdc>)
3. NCAA rules limit schools to the equivalent of 11.7 Division 1 baseball scholarships a year. That tuition money is typically split up across an entire forty-player roster, meaning most D-1 baseball players end up with about 30% of their tuition paid for, although that number can be supplemented with academic scholarships too. Division 2 is limited to nine baseball scholarships. Division 3 schools aren't allowed to offer any athletic scholarship money at all. Statistics show just 7% of high school baseball players are good enough to make it to college ball.



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