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Combining Spirituality and Sportsmanship: The Christian Perspective

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INTRODUCTION

SPORTS AND RELIGION

The relationship between sports and religion can be traced to the ancient Olympic Games of 776 BC in Athens, Greece. The Olympic Games by then was tagged a paganistic activity and this led to the abolishment in 393 AD. However, Pierre de Coubertin brought back the games in 1896 and he has been regarded as the father of modern Olympics. One of those philosophical beliefs and practices that have pitched Christianity against sports is Asceticism. It is a religious practice that feels the body is evil and must be denied any pleasure so as to be pure and acceptable to God. It is an attempt to discipline the body and the activities practiced including sports which they feel are antithetical to godliness. It is a lifestyle characterised by abstinence from sensual or carnal pleasure.

Traces of this religious or philosophical beliefs can be found in the scriptures.

- **1 Timothy 4:8** For bodily exercise profiteth little, but godliness is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is and of that which is to come.
- **1 Corinthians 9:27** But I keep under my body and bring it into subjection lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway.
- **Mark 8:34** And when he had called the people unto him with his disciples also, he said unto them, "whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."

With the mindset of asceticism adherence of this philosophical belief are pious and will give up anything to attain a spiritual state.

The second concept that predate this period is Scholasticism. This is a philosophical thought that emphasizes acquisition of knowledge more than the spiritualism. It places more emphasis on reasoning and conceptual analysis. When individuals or group of people place more emphasis on acquisition of knowledge more than any other thing, this will definitely be detrimental to sports. Ascetism portray self-discipline, self-denial and abstinence. Are they not inimical to good health in that we need physical exercise for optimum health?

These two concepts (ascetism and scholasticism) might have hold forth in ancient times, however, in the modern times like this Churches have incorporated Sports, games and recreation into their religious programmes for health reasons, and most especially to propagate the gospel and reach the youths.

Local, National and International sporting events have created opportunities to reach athletes with the Gospel of Christ. In 2018, the world Cup was held in Russia. Despite the stiff opposition from the government, the Churches still find opportunities to reach out to players, organisers and visitors.

Jackson (2018) writing on World Cup Evangelism has flourished. What comes next? observed that the 2018 World Cup in Russia isn't the first-time government, sports and the church have clashed. It was noted that when Olympic games was held in communist China in 2008, the evangelical ministries adjusted their approach when by encouraging Christian athletes to share the gospel with fellow participants rather than sanding missionaries.

Christian athletes are not left behind in appreciating God's hand in their success. They are also human tools in reaching out to other athletes with the gospel of Christ. We should know and realise that Christianity and Sport played complementary and supportive roles. Looking at the two concepts, we find the issue of rules and regulations, standardisation, and universality. The doctrine of Christ is universal, so also is the rules and regulations. If any athlete goes against the rules and regulations, there

is always a penalty, so also in sports we have sanctions for those who go against the commandments of God. These instil fear and comportment in the two concepts. We must also quickly point out that self-discipline can be found in the two concepts.

Christianity and sports are two concepts that have universal identification, different interpretation and application. Christianity is the belief and practice of a group of people in Christ Jesus and the Bible with its teaching, doctrine and practice. It is a way of life that reflects the encounter of the body of Christ with Jesus which influences their behaviour. It is an assemblage of a group of people whose action and behaviour in all spheres of life including secular reflect an association with Jesus Christ who will do what he will do and refrain from those practices that are inimical to his life style.

In *Acts 4:13* Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John and perceived that they were unlearned and ignorant men, they marvelled: and took knowledge of them that they had been with Jesus. That is an identification. Sport is another concept with wide application and universality. It can be seen as a game occurrence, a competitive and recreational activity with demonstration of skills and prowess with the aim of improving one's health or win a prize. It is an activity in which individuals try to outwit one another and deploying any strategy (ethical or unethical) to have a competitive or comparative advantage over others because of the prize.

From sociological point of view, Sport is an activity that can promote upward social mobility and improving one's status the ladder of social Stratification. Spirituality comes along with Christianity, as sportsmanship with sports. Spirituality is what is seen in an individual who professes to be adherent follower of Christ attitudinal disposition to Conformity with teaching of Christ. It is a practice and behaviour of followers of Christ that goes along with the principles of non-conformity with unethical practices and worldly activities. It goes along with godliness. It goes along with self-denial, holiness, extreme love for one another, non-retaliation, willingness to endure in face of provocation, believing and wanting the good of others. *Phil. 4:8* game is a summary of spirituality which is embedded in Christianity. "Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report, if there be any virtue and if there be any praise, think on these things.

The question is, is there any link between spirituality and sports? To provide an answer to this let us look at the concept of Sportsmanship. It can be seen as the ability to win without necessarily being overjoyous or bragging to ridicule the loser. It is the ability or mental strength and attitudinal disposition to success without causing the opponent to feel miserable or lose without a feeling of remorse or complaining. It is the attribute or virtue displayed that showed being magnanimous in victory or loss and comes with virtues such as honesty, fairness, love and empathy, Amicik (2014) sees sportsmanship as treating others as you will treat yourself, be it officials, playmates, opponents. This was buttressed with the statement that once you make a choice, you have to live with its consequences.

Sportsmanship can also be seen from the point of ethics. Good sportsmanship as ethical behaviour and bad sportsmanship as unethical behaviour. Ethics itself has been seen as a moral philosophy of what is right or / wrong or code of moral practices. The study of the effect of moral principles and standards of human endeavour or conducts.

From the perspective of Christianity, ethical behaviours are synonymous to Christian virtues as exemplified in *Phil. 4:8* and *Acts 24:16* - having a conscience void of offence towards God and man.

Some of the unethical behaviours and unsportsmanship tendencies which are antithetical to Christian virtues are:

- Cheating
- Corruption
- Age Falsification
- Match fixing
- Use of performance-enhancing drugs
- Preferential treatment
- Scandal of all kinds including sexual harassment, to mention a few.

What are some of the unsportsmanship (unethical) behaviours in sports?

- Verbal abuse of opponents.
- Excessive celebrations following a victory
- Feigning injury
- Match Fixing

- Age falsification
- Drugs
- Bribery of players and referees, intimidation & violence

Sportsmanship is playing according to the rules of the game, not minding the outcome. It is accepting whether victory or loss gracefully. Avoiding all forms of hostility or cheating that will allow individual gain preferential treatment or undue gains at the detriment of opponents. It can be seen as on the field of play activities or behaviours that portray an individual or team as playing for the love of the game and, rules of the game and love for all without undue influence, and interference and that portend winning at all cost.

What does the Bible say about unsportsmanship behaviour in sports?

Eph. 4:1-16

Attributes of Sportsmanship:

- Respect for one's opponents
- Playing by the rules
- Accepting a judge's final verdicts whether win or lose

Unsportsmanlike attributes are:

- Being rude - argumentative with opponents when an offence is committed
- Proving right when one is wrong
- Trying to evade sanction / penalty due to one's fault
- Challenging officials' decision that does not favour a player or an athlete.

Good sportsmanship is Christlikeness on the field of play. Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus - Phil. 2:5

- On the field of play, we should be ambassadors of Christ i.e., representatives of Christ, In 1 Pet 2:21 ...leaving us an example that we should follow his steps.
- 1 Pet. 3:8 - 11 Not rendering evil for evil or railing for railing
- Phil. 4:8 Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise think on these things.
- 1 Cor. 10:31 whether therefore ye eat or drink or whatsoever ye do (sports, games, competition, recreation) do all to the glory of God 1 Cor. 1:1 Be Ye Followers of me, even as I also am of Christ.
- Romans 12:10 Be kindly affectioned to one another (even on the field of play) with brotherly love, in honour preferring one another.
- Verse 18 If it be possible, as much as I lieth in you, live peaceably with all men.
- Verse 20 Therefore if thine enemy (opponent on the field of play) hunger; feed him (help him) if he thirsts give him drink (assist him)
- Verse 21 Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good.
- 2 Timothy 4:7 I have fought a good fight (have played a good game), I have finished the race (competition, soccer, basketball match) I have kept the faith (I have played according to the rules without cheating or undue advantage)
- 2 Timothy 2:5 If a man (an athlete) also strives for mastery (play for a laurel or medal) yet is he not crowned (podium experience) except he strived lawfully (sportsmanly).
- Philippians 2:3 Let nothing (playing a game, participating in a sporting Competition) be done through strife or vain glory, but in lowliness of mind, let each (players) esteem others better than themselves.
- Proverbs 24:17 Rejoice not when thine enemy (opponent on the field of sports) falleth, and let not thine heart be glad when he stumbles (fall)
- Matt 5:44. But I say unto you bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you.

History has it that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the missionaries used sports as well as their industrial and education scheme in the training of Africans in pursuit of moral and industrial education Schemes.

Ideology of athleticism and the missionary educational pursuit and incursion in Africa, pointed to a significant relationship between Christianity and sports. History has it that the Scots had their athletic evangelists who were as enthusiastic in their religious as British settlers were in their cultural evangelism, introducing imperial sports to British Central Africa during the 1890s.

Two British, Hetherwick and Weatherhead, a Scot and an Englishman might be regarded as representatives of the distinct educational traditions, one emphasizing industrial education and manual work, the other encouraging team games with both concerned with the character, manliness and the body in addition to literary education.

'Cricket' was a medium of instruction of the mind as well as a recreation and training for the body. Games were a useful way for a newly arrived athletic missionary to establish positive contact with the African pupils. For the Blantyre missionaries, sport and games were understood to be good for health and character.

Hokkanen, M. (2005). Christ and the imperial games fields in South - Central Africa - sport and the Scottish Missionaries in Malawi 1880-1914: Utilitarian Compromise

The grounded theory approach is one of the models for understanding the relationship between religion and sports performance.

A religion & sports performance (RSP) Model identified 3 fundamental factors (religious practices, degrees of religious beliefs and religious culture) and six contributing factors (coping strategy, religious support, psychological effects: performance outcomes, religious dietary practices, degrees and mental health and healing). Both the fundamental and contributing factors invariably will influence athletes' performance on the field of play and the way they relate with opponents, that is to say the exhibition or practice of sportsmanship.

What are the signs that shows that our sportsmen and women are religious?

- Prayer before the game, during and after the games (will this affect their behaviours on the field?)
- Making the sign of the cross
- Pointing to the heavens to Celebrate a goal made

How will ontology and epistemology influence our understanding of athlete's behaviour on the field of sports? Ontology is the study of nature of reality & what kinds of things exist (Crotty, 1998) Epistemology addresses what we can know and how we can know it. (Richards, 2003).

EXPERIENCE OF PARTICIPANTS

We need to consider athletes belief in God or religion and practice of the believer. Research efforts in the past and recent times on sports and religion have focused on issues such as stress, anxiety and confidence (Dillon and Tait, 2000; Hoven, 2017; Noh & Shahdan, 2020; Park, 2000). Prayer as a coping strategy. For support, to feel calm as a performance enhancement (Noh and Shahdan, 2021) Healing of Athletes well-being (Howe & Parker, 2014, Roe and Parker, 2016).

If sport is a vehicle for acquiring life skills, what role will Christianity play?

Spirituality and sportsmanship if combined will remove or reduce the ills associated with sports.

How has the desire to win at all cost affect sportsmanship behaviour?

Which will be more disposed to sportsmanship and unsportsmanship behaviours, Amateur or Professional sports?

Problems to be solved will not be limited to athletes alone but also officials.

The Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on 28th September 2011 stated that:

1. Reaffirming the nature of Sport itself, based on fair-play and equal competition, requires that unethical practices and behaviours in sport be forcefully and effectively, countered.
2. Away of the pressures which modern society marked among other things, by the race for success and economic profits, bring to bear on sport.
3. Stressing their belief that the consistent application of the principles of good governance and ethics in sports would be a significant factor in helping to eradicate corruption, manipulation of sports results (match fixing) and other malpractices in sports.
4. Convinced that match-fixing may erode confidence among the public if it perceives sports as a place where manipulation gives substantial financial benefits to certain individuals rather than as an activity where the glorious uncertainty of sport results predominates.

International organisations like Interpol have collaborated, with, FIFA to stem the rising problem of match fixing and its associating crime. Match fixing in football is a global challenge. Estimates of the money made through this illegal and unethical practices runs into millions of dollars and Euro worldwide. It has been discovered that match-fixing, poses a wider danger, as the money generated is used by criminals for other illegal activities. The five core principles of protecting the integrity of football by INTERPOL are:

- Partnership.

- Information,
- Coordination
- Prevention
- Proactivity.

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