

7

Exploring Sport as a Subject for Critique, and Potential Places for Constructive Thinking in Theological Inquiry

Colin Destache

INTRODUCTION

Sport grips cross-sections of the world like little else. In this season of the Olympiad, perhaps it is a relevant event to help paint this picture. When the Olympics open, it is expected that an estimated 20 million people will tune in just for the opening ceremonies – not to mention the events and competitions that will take place in subsequent weeks.¹ The NFL’s Super Bowl will almost surely fetch the attention of over 100 millions viewers, as it has in recent years, and is already breaking records for the price of championships tickets.² In the United States in particular, and across the world more generally, youth sports participation is at an all-time high and is as competitive in nature as ever.³ Even in the midst of a global pandemic, sport has hardly ceased. Early on, sport could not help but rear its head in newly adapted sports talk shows, daily planning of how to return to “normal” competition, and the early release of sports documentaries to tame the appetites of sport deprived fans.⁴ Today, it largely continues as “normal” even as the day-to-day lives of millions remained disrupted.

Considering sport’s wide influence and firm captivation, sport might be a necessary place to be considered theological inquiry. Attempts have been made in various ways, as will be briefly illustrated below. Scholarship, however, appears to have historically overlooked and kept sport as a limited topic in the *theological* inquiry. I contend that a failure to think theologically about sport may constitute a failure to reckon with the location of God’s work in the world in favor of personal hierarchies of knowledge and its pursuit. Though not *the* issue at hand, sport is certainly *an* issue for serious consideration in theology. Moreover, there are multiple locations that can be demonstrated as fit – even ripe – for theological critique and construction in ways that are largely unexplored.

One worry that has served as a catalyst for my own interest in exploring theology and sport is that failure to think theologically about sport has appeared to contribute to dualistic thinking concerning the mind and the body. This fact of the matter does not appear limited to either end of the theological spectrum within Christian thinking. From one end, so-called “liberal” or “progressive” Christianity can tend to overlook sport as a potential location for theological reflection by categorizing it as trivial. In this case, sport does not rise to the top when compared to other seemingly more pressing social and cultural issues such as justice, race, or gender. Though, as will be illustrated, such topics are relevant topics for consideration within a theology of sport as I propose.

From the other end, Evangelical (and here I use that category in the American sense as a social, political, *and* religious descriptor) or otherwise “conservative” Christians appear to overlook sport as a potential location for theological reflection by limiting engagement to the misappropriation of quotes from Paul’s letters – perhaps while also forgetting Jesus’s own lack of reference to sport despite living his life well within the social or cultural reach of the Imperial coliseum. Fear of distorting Christian doctrine has remained by not allowing it to be practically critiqued or engaged with constructively through

- 1 Deitsch, Richard; “The Beijing Olympics are nearly here – and viewership is going to be a challenge;” *The Athletic*; December 6, 2021; <https://theathletic.com/2997410/2021/12/06/the-beijing-olympics-are-nearly-here-and-viewership-is-going-to-be-a-challenge/>; (accessed January 31, 2022).
- 2 Kaplan, Daniel; “L.A. hosting, guarantee of a California team driving record Super Bowl ticket price;” *The Athletic*; January 26, 2022; https://theathletic.com/3094782/2022/01/26/l-a-hosting-guarantee-of-a-california-team-driving-record-super-bowl-ticket-price/?article_source=search&search_query=super%20bowl%20ticket%20price; (accessed January 27, 2022).
- 3 Real Sports with Bryant Gumbel; “Norwegian Way;” Nick Dolin; John Frankel; HBO, May 2019.
- 4 This observation comes primarily from my own personal consumption of sports news media. Namely, the television radio show, *Pardon The Interruption*; my own casual fanhood of the National Basketball Association, Major League Baseball, and the National Hockey League; as well as the documentary event “The Last Dance” in mid 2020.

the realities of the sporting world, or by only reorienting sports as an influential vehicle for Christian mission.⁵ Each of these cases – “liberal” or “progressive,” and Evangelical or “conservative” – in their own way prioritize the mind over the body in (apparently) more intellectually noble topics or the pursuit of proper and correct belief.⁶

Looking back to pre-history, one finds sport as a major focal point of peoples’ creation narrative and a pivotal point of personal and communal identity. Sport and religion, at least, have a long history together. This leaves me even more surprised by the apparent lack of theological discourse surrounding sport at any level of rigor.

In indigenous traditions, namely those of the Iroquois in what is now North America, what may be recognized as the modern sport of lacrosse stands at the center of their creation narrative and the stories of who they are and where they come from.⁷ The Greek legend of Pheidippides is reminiscent of today’s marathon. Celtic myth prominently includes the game *sinteag*. The Christian church itself has a long history of relating to (though not always *thinking* about) “sport” that dates as far back as the middle ages and the crusades, and potentially to the early church.⁸ This history of sport’s enmeshment with the religious world, however brief, appears similarly, though not identically, overlooked as contemporary thinking about sport and the way it can be engaged critically and constructively for theological exploration.

To date, the tendency of writing on sports, religion, and theology appears to revolve around three things: ethics, religious experience and worship, and spirituality or psychology. Ethics’ focus has tended towards the rights or wrongs in various areas of the sports world – on or off the field.⁹ The study of religious experience and worship has offered insight on orienting one’s play, training, or competition toward God *as an act of worship*. On this topic, the ties of sport to religion in various settings is well chronicled.¹⁰ Scholars and practitioners also write of the psychological benefits of spirituality in the overall training of athletes.¹¹ However, such thinking need not stay limited to these categories. To do so cuts short the possibilities for sports and theology. There is room to go further. Not for some stuffy or high-browed reason of pursuing something highfalutin like “theology,” but to imaginatively explore the possibilities of how sport might be thought about.

Thinking about sport can be about more than ethics. Contemplating sport is not only about doing right or wrong; following the rules or breaking them; playing fair or cheating. Along the same lines, thinking about how sport might be played is more than merely considering how “bad” one can be and still get away with it in the field of play. While there certainly are theological ethics, and even attempts to weave in more specific theological loci and various Christian doctrines, to focus solely on ethics is to miss the opportunity for what may be a deeper understanding of sport theologically.¹² This reality is echoed in other areas of focus within in scholarly and popular writing or thinking.

Thinking about sport should also be about more than merely one’s religious experience and practice of worship. Certainly, the entirety of one’s life (sports included) can, and perhaps ought to, serve as a witness for the faith proclaimed by any given individual. This, however, is not necessarily the equivalent to the playing sports as an act of worship, or a game or practice providing a (Christian) religious experience. Yet, at least in popular literature, things appear to be limited to this approach.¹³ In scholarship, the connection between religion and sport is often taken up.¹⁴ This paper, of course, is in participation with a conference on sport and religion. Both offer something. But, again, as with ethics, the emphasis

5 Anecdotally, upon undertaking my own casual investigation of the biographies of some of these writers, and knowing others personally, much of the scholarship most readily found tends to come from authors on the more conservative end of Christian thinking.

6 The anecdotal nature of this claim should be noted. It is made based on my own membership in the Evangelical church as a young adult, participation in the camp and conference culture of Evangelicalism throughout college, and my current tenure as an employee with the athletic ministry of CRU (formerly Campus Crusade for Christ), Athletes in Action. While I stand by it as being adequately confirmed upon anyone’s inquiry, it is nonetheless anecdotal in nature.

7 Downey, Allan; *The Creator’s Game: Lacrosse, Identity, and Indigenous Nationhood* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2018); p 13

8 Harvey, Lincoln; *A Brief Theology of Sport* (Eugene: Cascade, 2014); p 24, 37, 49. Ellis, Robert; *The Games People Play: Theology, Religion, and Sport* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2014); p 83. Treat, Jeremy; “Sports in the biblical narrative” in *Global Perspectives on Sports and Christianity* eds. Afe Adogame, Nick J. Watson and Andrew Parker (London: Routledge, 2018), p 29-44

9 Parry, Jim ed.; “Theological Ethics in Sport,” in *Theology, Ethics and Transcendence in Sports* eds. Jim Parry, Mark Nesti and Nick Watson (New York: Routledge, 2011); p 21-99

10 Smith, Brian; *The Assist: A Gospel-Centered Guide to Glorifying God Through Sports* (Houston: Lucid, 2017). Adogame, Afe, Nick J. Watson and Andrew Parker eds.; *Global Perspectives on Sports and Christianity* (London: Routledge, 2018).

11 Kelly, SJ, Patrick; *Youth Sport & Spirituality* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2015). Hemmings, Brian, Nick J. Watson and Andrew Parker eds.; *Sport, Psychology, and Christianity: Welfare, Performance and Consultancy* (London: Routledge, 2019).

12 Hamilton, Mark; “An Augustinian Critique of Our Relationship to Sport” in *Theology, Ethics, and Transcendence in Sports* (New York: Routledge, 2011); p 25-34.

13 Smith; *The Assist*.

14 Adogame, Afe, Nick J. Watson and Andrew Parker eds.; *Global Perspectives on Sports and Christianity*.

on worship and religious experience may fall short of the critical or constructive theological exploration available elsewhere. On a practical and individual level, engaging sports and religion as such may actually distort the nature of sport and what sport is *per se*.¹⁵

Thinking about sports can also be about more than spirituality or psychology. It is fair and appropriate to recognize the benefits of the practices of discipline entered into by athletes that are comparable or transferrable to the spiritual life. This should not be determined as the only place for reflection – and, in my opinion, certainly not the most necessary. While comparisons of discipline in the sports world and the Christian life are many, they are means to an end, rather than the end itself. To make them the end is to distort the task at hand. Though, contrary to the potential distortion of sport by viewing it as a religious experience or act of worship, by appropriating aspects of Christian spirituality *merely* for psychological and performative benefit, it may be the faith or spirituality itself that is distorted instead.

There is certainly a time for ethics. Pursuing an understanding of right and wrong, good and evil, virtue and vice, justice and injustice should not be absent from the thinking done related to the topic of sport. There is also a place for one's religious experience and display of worship. That place just may not be in the training center or competitive arena – despite the way in which one might be as an athlete can serve as a witness to faith. The same goes for a sense of spirituality that gets misapplied to the psychological dimensions of performance training and the competitive mind. While these aspects of thinking about and engaging in sport may have their time and place, they miss on the opportunity to pursue a different kind of understanding of sport theologically. Specifically, they fall short of being able to position oneself to think theologically about sport in areas surrounding doctrinal frameworks of the Christian theological tradition and more classical theological loci. In short, an opportunity is missed to attempt to speak about theology and sport systematically.

As one turns from the misses and shortfalls of theological attempts which touch almost exclusively on the topics discussed above, there is the opportunity to think critically and constructively about sport and doctrine. This turn is a move in the direction of considering what *possibilities* there might be when it comes to thinking theologically about sport. First, critical and constructive theology begins to consider new possibilities for the way sport can be related to. Second, such thinking can begin to identify avenues for understanding theological principles and core Christian doctrine through a language and illustration that seriously engages what is perhaps one of the most popular and culturally transcendent cultural activities on the planet – i.e. sport. In both cases this happens by speculating how traditional Christian doctrines and theological loci might be explored through the language and lens of sport, *and* how sport might be explored through the language and lens of Christian theology and doctrine.

Why is this worthwhile at all? Why not leave one's focus on the consideration of ethics and reflecting on the religious or spiritual dimensions of sport? Why bother attempting to locate opportunities for theological inquiry about sports in the historical doctrines of Christian theology or frame it in some systematic way? Doing this is necessary because of the ever-increasing influence of sport on the world. We have already caught a glimpse of the grip sport has had on the life and mind of people throughout history. It has always been there. Sports' influence continues to rise as modernity affords (monetarily or otherwise) increasing numbers of people the leisure to begin consuming the entertainment of sport through watching live and broadcasted events or participating in sport themselves. Because of this influence and its place in social life, I do not think that one can help but reckon with sport from a theological perspective. As Christianity continues to engage the world it finds itself in, Christians must continue to engage that with which the world consumes itself.

Sticking with my supposition that *theologies* of sport are still in their infancy of being developed, perhaps it is as good of a place as any to begin with the doctrine of creation. Considering the reality that theologies of sport are being developed, but in limited instances, it is also worth noting that creation is one area where some thinking has been done. Lincoln Harvey, in his book, *A Brief Theology of Sport*, works to situate a theological understanding of sport within the framework of a Christian doctrine of creation. Harvey begins his movement toward a theology of sport discussing traditional claims and understandings of creation *ex nihilo*.¹⁶ He does so by situating creation *ex nihilo* as reflective of both the fact of creation being out of nothing – i.e. creation was not the development of some substance such as a part of the creator God or a pre-formed/pre-created substance – and that of creation being from nothing – i.e. that creation was not prompted in some casual way, but was done out of the freedom of God.¹⁷

¹⁵ Harvey; *A Brief Theology of Sport*; p 90.

¹⁶ Harvey; *A Brief Theology of Sport*; p 77.

¹⁷ Harvey; *A Brief Theology of Sport*; p 78, 79

Harvey elaborates on the qualitative differences between God and God's creation as a stemming of the latter's resulting from the action of the former. As he does, Harvey moves towards an understanding of creation in the line of Rowan Williams' conception of creatures as "not that serious" while beginning to hint at the Barthian notion of contingency at which Harvey comes to aim.¹⁸ Harvey's initial treatment of an understanding of creation climaxes in the combination of God's freedom and the creatures lack of seriousness to assert the "unnecessary yet meaningful" essence of creation.¹⁹ Finally, taking the unnecessary yet meaningful essence of creation and coupling it with notions of play, Harvey lands on a theology of sport, rooted in the doctrine of creation and propelled by notions of play, that he describes as a liturgical celebration of contingency. In opposition to prominent theologians such as Karl Rahner and Jurgen Moltmann – whose ideas point more towards worship and play, respectively, being for a purpose outside oneself/themselves – Harvey's emphasis on the celebration of contingency as a part of an understanding of a doctrine of creation is one example of sport being positioned as something worthy of theological consideration *per se*.

A second doctrinal area that has received some treatment by theologians engaging with matters of sport is eschatology. Robert Ellis, in his book, *The Games People Play: Theology, Sport, and Religion*, develops an eschatological dimension – among other things – of sport in what he terms "sport as divine encounter."²⁰ In the midst of discussing the *imago dei*, and sin and salvation, Ellis's idea of sport as divine encounter points beyond to something new; something transcendent; something different. The *imago dei* is indicative of the potential of the creature – already oriented toward what will be new, what transcends, and what is different.²¹ The transcendence in question, which Ellis identifies in the experience of the athlete in sport (a common approach) and the spectator of sport (an uncommon approach), is something is happening in real time.²² Ellis loosely parallels these two transcendences more generally with the transcendence of creatures and the transcendent nature of God as he elaborates on the happening-in-real-time nature of the straining towards what is new or what is different that is the eschatological divine encounter.²³ He qualifies his claims by offering the disclaimer that it is not merely the transcendent effort of the one striving upward or beyond – such as the creature reaching beyond towards its Creator – but "the transcendence of God also [reaching] towards us."²⁴ This striving and reaching towards God – towards what is new, beyond, different – is only possible in the first place because of God's reaching towards us. Why this is important to consider when it comes to sport is because of the way this aspect – the eschatological – differentiates sport from potentially similar notions such as play. The striving is what brings one alive to reach towards the transcendent that enables the possibility of divine encounter with the God who will return to and return with something different and new.²⁵

Opinions will abound regarding whether Harvey's or Ellis's claims or conclusions hold their own weight. What appears undeniable is an attempt being made in two areas to situate theologies of sport within frameworks of Christian doctrine and systematic theology. Harvey and Ellis contribute to the necessity of not only building a more robust theology of sport, but also developing a way of engaging sport that has the potential to be an influential and impactful parallel to the way of sport. Of course, this is not to say that the theological loci and Christian doctrines they focus on must be the only ones focused on. Rather, it is to point to the potential for further critical and constructive thinking in additional loci and doctrine. In the concluding portion of this paper, I will highlight some of these potential locations, speculating as to what may be able to be said or thought about when it comes to the Church, salvation, sin, and the human.

Given the magnitude of sports fandom, perhaps a reasonable place to start is speculating about the bodies that follow particular sports, particular sports teams, and particular sporting events. What might be able to be said about the fact that fans gather, and that they do so around a common focal

18 Ibid.; p 81, 88-96.

Williams, Rowan: "Not Being Serious: Thomas Merton and Karl Barth;" 2008; <http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/1205/not-being-serious-thomas-merton-and-karl-barth> in Harvey, Lincoln: A Brief Theology of Sport (Eugene: Cascade, 2014); p 81.

19 Harvey; A Brief Theology of Sport; p 83.

20 Ellis; "To Boldly God: Sport as Divine Encounter?" in *The Games People Play: Theology, Religion, and Sport* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2014); p 228-274.

21 Ellis; *The Games People Play*; p 232.

22 Ibid.; p 233.

23 Ibid.; p 235.

24 Ibid.; p 246.

25 Ellis; *The Games People Play*; p 246-248. Ellis applies this idea to the move from sin to salvation. He does this as an application of the idea of transcendence moving towards an eschatological reality in the divine encounter to the doctrines of sin and salvation and their impact of the reality of the creature (262-274). Though, he does not address those doctrines specifically. Rather, Ellis focuses on the application of his ideas of divine encounter, transcendence, and eschatology to the move from the reality of sin to the reality of salvation.

point? Fans flock to an arena or stadium as an expression of the belief they have about a particular team, matchup, or event. But they also carry that identity as a fan – as a follower – when they leave. Similarly, Christians gather in a church building or elsewhere as a corporate body as an expression of the belief they have about God. Their gatherings from one place to another carry certain markers that make it what it is even while carrying the uniqueness that fan bases maybe have between different teams, or even among different sports. Those gathered (and even many who may not gather) also carry that identity with them when they go. How they go, where they go, and what they do continues the expression of the identity that brought them together in the first place. These similarities – these parallel characteristics – offer some potential for thinking ecclesiology about sport. Through them, one has the opportunity to speculate what might be said about a doctrine of the Church using the particularities of the games and gatherings that people watch, play, and are a part of.

A second systematic area of possibility for a theology of sport is the doctrine of salvation. Given the role of a particular person in the work of salvation in Christianity, a temptation could be to focus on the potentially “saving” acts attributed to the legends of various games. This, though, would perhaps be too simple, and be too close to approaching an actual idolatry that those focused on views of sport as worship or religious experience tend to be worried about.²⁶ Rather, focusing on some of the systems within the professional sports industry can offer a way to think about the saving mechanism of a doctrine of salvation. Large amounts of stock are put into professional sports drafts and free agency seasons. It is here that not only fans, but players, coaches, and managers place significant hope in moving from a losing team to a winning team the following season – from being saved from future seasons of defeat.²⁷ The systems of drafting and free agency provide for an idealism of the good that could come if the right player(s) were added to *my* team or *my* organization in order to move from bad to good, from the death of losing to the life of victory. Furthermore, within this thinking about drafts and free agency, there is room for one to consider ideas concerning election. Though, in the case of sports drafts and free agency it is the elect (those players chosen) who are doing the “saving” – which certainly has some potential when thought of in light of Barth’s concept of Christ as the elect.²⁸ Nonetheless the parallels present provide enough space for a bridge between the two subjects as they’re considered soteriologically – whether to think about salvation as such, or to think constructively about sports and salvation.

What is it that sport would need saving from? In line with the thinking being done here, sin would seem to be reasonable and acceptable answer. Sin, however, is no easy thing to define. As much as it may be individual and easily measurable transgressions, sin is also deeper and even insidious systemic realities. When it comes to sport, perhaps the lowest hanging fruit when it comes to speaking of sin is, in fact, the actual transgressions of the rulebook – cheating. Cheating for any particular gain by a team or a player is surely an easily measurable transgression often committed on an individual basis. These “sins” are perhaps worth something. They certainly should not be completely dismissed or overlooked. However, placing too much emphasis here tempts one back towards the discussions of ethics that have more regularly dominated discussion around sport. Instead, perhaps there is room to think more systematically about sin when it comes to sport, and in a way that better appreciates the consumptive nature of sin on the world. A few examples: One may consider the Houston Astros baseball team large scale theft of opposing signals which eventually helped propel them to a World Series victory.²⁹ Another consideration could be to think about the historical and contemporary absence of black or other non-white head coaches in otherwise black and non-white dominated sports.³⁰ Somewhat more abstractly, but finally, one might consider the detrimental toll that sport (i.e. both the game itself and those in control of the athletes training, competing, resting, etc.) places on the body – especially as the level of competition increases. In each instance, the realities are relatively well known and too often ignored. If action is

26 Smith; The Assist.

27 Pardon the Interruption; “NFL Draft Preview;” Michael Wilbon and Tony Kornheiser; ESPN, April 23, 2020.

28 This way of thinking may even line up well with Barth’s ideas concerning election whereas the elect is Christ himself and in that Christ is salvation (CD II/2). In that case of sports and theology when thinking about professional sports drafts and free agency, the elect is any particular player chosen by some team with the hope of the addition of that player significantly altering the present and future reality of said team’s success.

29 It has since been discovered that during the 2017 Major League Baseball Season, the Houston Astros engaged in an illegal sign stealing operation. To a certain degree stealing signs is an arguably common and accepted reality in any sport. Part of the strategy, in fact, is being able to outsmart and outplay your opponent in the way you call “plays.” What separates this case from typical sign stealing is the extent to which the whole organization went to succeed in stealing opposing team’s signs unnoticed – going so far as to phone in stolen signals to the field from a camera booth in the press-box in order for those signs to be relayed to the players at bat or in the field by those in the dugout. It was an operation that was invested in on multiple levels of the organization, which has gone largely ignored in terms of any punishment.

30 According to the New York Times, only 3 of the 32 head coaches in the NFL during the 2019 season were black (“Only Three N.F.L. Head Coaches Are Black. ‘It’s Embarrassing’” January 1, 2020). Similarly, concerning majority owners of major pro franchises, according to The Athletic, out of 150 teams in 2020, only one is majority owned by a black person (“The Five North American major leagues will have 150 teams in 2020 – but only 1 black majority owner. Why?” February 11, 2020).

taken, it serves only to feign effort by those in power, or merely tokenize the people and the positions in consideration.³¹ In the case of the physical effects on the body, they are too often chalked up to being a “normal” part of the game. Yet, in recreational or “playful” enjoyment of sports games, the same physical abuse may largely (but not always) be avoided. In each case, both the individual and systemic, and given the overall widespread prevalence across sports and teams, one is provided with a potential subject for critical and constructive theological thinking in the world of sport when it comes to thinking about sin.

The final suggestion for theological thinking to be considered in this paper is that of theological anthropology. Ending here is fitting on a few fronts. First, generally speaking, sport has a long history of openly aspiring to shaping the personhood of its participants. Early amateur sport was used as a vehicle for the shaping of one’s manhood, particularly in Protestant America. The birth of muscular Christianity sought not only to develop a concept of masculinity in turn of the 20th century men, but to do so in a way that enabled them to carry forth the Christian gospel.³² Collegiate athletics in the wake of the Second World War served as a training ground for a particular type of (hu)man and for said man to hold a certain level of ability. The 1972 passing of Title IX legislation in the United States enabled further participation by women in athletics – particularly college – creating (and sometimes limiting) opportunity for both the breaking of barriers to access and opening the doors to particular kinds of development for themselves.³³

Second, the area of theological anthropology may be the most apt place for overlap with topics of theological consideration that have been taken up elsewhere across contemporary theological scholarship. Namely, bodies and gender. Though normally able-bodied sports are the most widely and popularly consumed, athletes constitute an important subject for thinking about theological anthropology and the body because of the *range* of abled bodies represented in sport. Handicapped sports grow at every level of competition.³⁴ The level of competitiveness among handicapped athletes is such that a paralympic runner became the first ever double-amputee to compete in the Olympic games during 2012 London Summer Olympics.³⁵ Even within normatively-abled competition, there is the spectrum of amateur to professional abilities that profoundly shape the identity of the respective athlete in their own right.

When it comes to gender, the case of South African, Caster Semenya, – a female athlete who has been banned from competition against other female athletes because of naturally elevated levels of testosterone – and court cases across the United States concerning young transgendered women or men who seek to compete against other athletes of their gender identity are curious cases to consider exploring.³⁶ Similarly, the NCAA’s wading further into the discussion surrounding transgendered competition with policy changes and directives in early 2022 continues to provide evidence of the topics of body and gender being important areas for social and theological consideration. Both gender and the body provide areas for theological thinking concerning sport in a way that roots itself in doctrinal areas – i.e. theological anthropology – while *also* engaging broader social and cultural issues.

Thirdly, theological anthropology may serve as a methodological springboard for other areas of systematic theological inquiry when it comes to sport. When the human is considered, for the Christian, one cannot help but be drawn to the humanity of God that we see in Jesus Christ. Reflecting on Christ, one can reasonably begin to extend to trinitarian and soteriological discussions through Christ’s participation in the economy of both the trinity and salvation. From the trinity one may move to a discussion of a doctrine of God or the Holy Spirit; from soteriology to discussions of the end-of-all-things or sin;

31 As stated above, the cheating undertaken by the Houston Astros was and is well known. It has even been somewhat formally condemned by the commissioner of Major League Baseball. Yet it still stands. In the case of black coaches, when it comes to hiring, teams are obligated to interview at least one minority coach during the hiring process for new head coaches. What is telling, and what borders (at least) on tokenizing the coaches and the process is that often that minority coach – especially if the serious contender(s) have already been determined – will only be a minority staff member of the team in question. Both these instances illustrate the systemic ignorance of instances worthy of other criticism and critique when it comes to Christian theology.

32 Putney, Clifford; *Muscular Christianity: Manhood and Sports in Protestant America, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 2001); p 127.

33 McDonagh, Eileen and Laura Pappano; *Playing with the Boys: Why Separate Is Not Equal in Sports* (New York: Oxford University, 2008) p 191.

34 While this is true, great disparities still exist. (“Diversifying Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in American College Athletics: The Case for Adaptive [And Other Non-Traditional] Sports” by Kevin T. McGinniss, Demetri Goutos, and Yetsa Tuakli-Wosornu in, *The Sports Journal*, January 10, 2020.)

35 A further point of interest when thinking about normatively abled bodied athletes and disabled athletes could be related to artificial intelligence. It is the contention of some, despite whatever dis-advantage any disability might provide, an advantage, rather, is supposedly given prosthetic limbs that are mechanically more efficient than the human body (e.g. Pistorius’s artificial lower legs while sprinting).

36 Longman, Jeré and Juliet Macur: “Caster Semenya Loses Case to Compete as a Woman in All Races” in *The New York Times*; May 1, 2019; <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/01/sports/caster-semenya-loses.html> (access May 3, 2020). Brechlin, Dan and Shawn McFarland: “Families of three Connecticut high school students file lawsuit seeking to prevent transgender athletes from participating in girls sports,” in *The Hartford Courant*; February 14, 2020; <https://www.courant.com/sports/high-schools/hc-sp-ciac-transgender-federal-lawsuit-20200212-20200212-wjk3p4i3evh25ayp7kksefmf4i-story.html> (accessed May 3, 2020)

and so on, and so forth. While the picture of sport theology may remain unclear in each of these instances, the sketch is beginning to provide an outline.

Some of these have begun to be explored and briefly outlined in this paper. Others provide potential for how new theological inquiry can be done in systematic and critically constructive ways. One need not limit their theological consideration of sport to the confines of ethics, religious experience and worship, and spirituality or psychology. By turning ones focus to diving deeply into the exploration of sport through critical and constructive, or systematic, theological engagement, possibilities are uncovered to relate to, participate in, and think about sport in new ways.

As ancient stories demonstrate, and recent history appears to confirm, people have been relating to, participating in, and thinking about sport for a long time – for all time. In its playing and politicizing, sport has been used for bad and for good. The shaping of one's person is contributed to by the world of sports impact on the lives of athletes and fans alike. Taking this history into account, and given current trends of popular consumption and participation, it does not appear that there will be much change to people's relating to, participating in, and thinking about sport anytime soon. When thinking theologically, to overlook these historic and current realities of both the sports world and theological world is to risk missing what God is doing at the location of God's work in the world. Given this reality, the possibilities for theological engagement highlighted above, and the reality of sports trends at the dawn of a new decade, it is essential to consider questions – and think of new questions! – regarding how a full and robust range of thinking about sport can be developed as a legitimate and exciting place for exploring theology in critical, constructive, and systematic ways.