

Our journey through the secular year

Sport and faith: finding the common ground

Introduction

What parallels exist between sport and faith? What can churches do to help people make connections, or to find common ground? This article is for those who love sport and want to use that passion to help others in their faith journeys, and for those who, while having no personal interest in sport, want to realise the potential, both in and out of church, of tapping into the passion of those who do.



these stories had been written as drama for stage or screen, they would have been criticised for implausibility – but they really happened. Eyewitness accounts of such sporting stories quickly become the stuff of legends.

Telling the story – and, in particular, eyewitness accounts – is a key part of spreading the Christian gospel. When the stories of Jesus, and those he told, are retold with as much enthusiasm and passion as you might tell of an ‘against the odds’ sporting achievement, people listen. Similarly, when people tell their own stories, people are moved. The unexpected twists and turns, the loose ends, the inspirational journeys of real lives are a powerful way to proclaim the faith.



Sport as common currency

What do people talk about at the back of your church? No doubt there will be a range of answers, but almost certainly they will include sport. For many, church on Sunday morning is the first ‘get together’ after Saturday’s sporting battles, and the beginning of the build-up to Sunday’s offerings. Crowds will have watched matches of various kinds, whether a professional team or the local under 12s. National and international sporting events – e.g. the Olympics, Wimbledon, the ‘Open’ – stir up even more interest. Many more will have watched on television, and millions will be talking about these things come Sunday morning. In today’s world, sport is a common currency.

Of course, it cannot be assumed that everyone is interested in sport – many will not understand or appreciate sermon illustrations based on events on a playing field. However, sport analogies and activities can make meaningful connections for people in and outside the church community.

Sport as drama

Sport is full of drama. The match whose outcome hangs in the balance until the very final minute of ‘extra’ time. The break-out winning try/goal/point. The unbearable tension of the ‘golden’ goal/point or penalty shoot-out. The comeback from two sets down to win the tennis championship. That split-second when an athletics performance is crowned with glory – or goes horribly awry. The joy and the tears – of participant and fan. If some of

Sporting metaphors

The apostle Paul uses various metaphors in his letters to communicate the gospel message to individuals and to churches. Some are military, but he also uses sporting imagery. Olympic games were first held in Greece in the 8th century BC; they were a popular entertainment under the rule of Rome and would have been familiar to Paul and his correspondents. In 1 Corinthians 9, Paul uses metaphors of running and boxing to illustrate the need for self-discipline. These particular metaphors appear on a number of occasions in Paul’s letters, so we might reasonably assume that either he or his correspondents were, in modern parlance, sports fans. There are many websites that can help you make best use of these biblical metaphors [WEB](#).

While the need to keep running towards the finishing line, or playing to the end of the game, are crucial elements of many sports, it is also interesting to consider whether contemporary sports offer any new sporting metaphors. Seeking to communicate the gospel using such metaphors will appeal to churched and unchurched alike. For example, in golf – when you hit a ball into the ‘rough’, it may take time but there is always a way back to the fairway. Or in football, rugby, hockey or similar – never give up until the final whistle. Sports fans may enjoy discovering more examples!

Sport as rest and recreation?

The heading might seem a little contradictory, but when people were asked whether they got enough rest, and what they did when resting (BBC Breakfast, September 2016), most said 'no' to the first question, and many cited the gym, running, cycling and other sporting activities in response to the second. Rest from the stresses and strains of work and the daily routine is often found in physical activity.

Perhaps 'recreation' is a better term to explore, particularly if we break it down: re-creation. Fun, yes, but also a chance to be 'made again', brought back to an initial state, refreshed and ready to return to fray. There are clear resonances here with

more common themes of spiritual re-creation and renewal, and an opportunity to explore them in fresh ways, reaching out well beyond conventional church boundaries.

Time for that tracksuit

Below are a range of ideas and suggestions for ways to connect sport and faith, and to use people's love of sports to build bridges between church and community. Not a definitive list, but some thoughts to get your own creative and imaginative – and sporting – minds working!

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Building bridges

- Organise a parish or community sports day with traditional events for all ages, e.g. egg and spoon/sack races, tug of war. If the weather is an issue, you could organise an indoor event with games such as table tennis, badminton, netball and basketball.
- Arrange a game of walking football. This recent innovation in the 'beautiful game' can be enjoyed, indoors or outside, by young and old, fit and not-so-fit, and can help to build bridges within a community [WEB](#).
- Set up your own 'Fantasy Football League' to create a new network that crosses church and non-church boundaries.
- Set up a 'dads and lads' football competition to connect with local people. Sports like pool, table tennis and dodge ball are a great draw at youth clubs and half-term/summer holiday schemes.
- Organise an 'alternative sports' day in a local care home with (e.g.) indoor bowling or boules, gentle parachute games, a small course marked with cones for residents to do simple circuits with Zimmer frames – yes, this really has been done, and very effectively!
- Organise sponsored events with local children and young people to support social action projects, e.g. bouncing on a trampoline (at 1p per bounce – you can raise hundreds of pounds), swimming, basketball, running. Fun runs in local parks are very popular and can appeal to all the family.



In and out of church

- Host a celebration with a local team who have done well (do not restrict this to football teams!). Or arrange a celebration of commitment and achievement – and a chance to reflect, perhaps – for a team that may not have done so well.
- Put on a storytelling workshop, using sporting stories as a way in to reflecting on life – everyone has a story to tell.
- Invite a local sports personality to speak (Christians in Sport has a good network of speakers [WEB](#)).
- Create a visual exhibition of local people, events and memorabilia (e.g. trophies, medals and certificates) and hold a celebration service for local sports groups.
- Hire a local gym, and use it as the venue for an act of worship. Link the recreational aspects of exercising with themes of renewal and re-creation. You could use each piece of gym equipment as a 'station' with a particular focus or theme.
- Arrange a prayer walk to a sports place, e.g. gym, park, school field. Ask those you meet on the way what prayers the local church could say for them.
- Use sport as a theme in a local school assembly.
- Join with a local sports team, professional or local, to engage with your locality in sharing goals such as helping disadvantaged youngsters, promoting health and fitness, or good citizenship.