

In Search of Perspective on Competitive Sport

The Power Plant Complex

In March 1922 an event took place that, in retrospect, seems characteristic of the Adventist approach to sports. The students of Emmanuel Missionary College requested that the faculty allow them to play volleyball. "The faculty investigated the correctness of volleyball and decided it could be played if hidden in back of the power plant."¹

Apparently they felt there was nothing intrinsically wrong with the game; however, they suspected that if it were played in full view of the school family and community, some would draw the wrong conclusions. In order to avoid the appearance of evil, the games would need to be hidden from sight.

The example above is no isolated instance. Historically the church's association with sports has frequently illustrated this "power plant complex." Even today the church often finds itself officially endorsing a prohibitive stand relating to interscholastic athletics while, at the same time, allowing infractions of that policy to take place "behind the power plant," i.e., in a non-SDA gymnasium, on a neutral field, or in an unofficially sponsored game.

We seem to feel that rather than giving leadership and direction to these games, which might be interpreted as promoting sport, it is better to wash our hands of the whole affair. As a consequence, our students meet at rented gymnasiums and use uncertified neighborhood officials—with mixed results.

To evaluate sport objectively and assess its place in Adventist education, a number of factors must be considered. Among these are Ellen White's counsels; sport and society; the development of the discipline of physical education; the training of physical education teachers; competition; and the relation of sport to Christian ethics.

Ellen G. White's Counsels

People frequently cite a variety of Spirit of Prophecy

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statements to support their desire to ban sports from SDA schools. In so doing, they seem to imply that circumstances today are exactly the same as when Ellen G. White condemned certain forms of sport at Battle Creek College.

However, Mrs. White was not alone in condemning the way school sports were conducted in her day; numerous others, in colleges, government, and elsewhere, expressed concern because of the brutality, rivalry, and preoccupation with sport by participants and spectators alike.

In reading Mrs. White's counsels relating to sports we have often failed to consider the circumstances that prompted her to write. As George Knight has suggested, Ellen White's educational concepts are not to be viewed as a "blueprint."² By her own admission, "the Lord has not designated any one, special, exact plan in education."³

We must always seek to maintain clarity of purpose amid changing circumstances for

one polar extreme is to rely unthinkingly on prophetic authority, while the other is to lean on rationality in an unhealthy manner that allows it to become an excuse for what we really wanted to do anyway... to rely either on Scripture or rational understanding without the aid of the other is a fatal misconception. Authoritative revelation and sanctified reason go hand in hand as we seek to understand God and develop a Christian educational system.⁴

Knight offers some suggestions to help us maintain balance and perspective. First, we should seek out the principles of Christian living and Christian education. Then we must attempt to relate the principles found to our personal lives and the educational setting in which we work.⁵

This process of evaluation and synthesis demands both a pragmatic understanding of daily realities as well as an understanding of God's revelation. A balanced perspective cannot be achieved by those who understand Scripture but lack insight into the world in which we live, or by those who understand human behavior, but fail to integrate this knowledge within the context of God's ultimate purpose for humankind.⁶ If Ellen White were alive today, one could hypothetically inquire whether she would give the same counsel regarding sports programs at SDA schools. There would probably be some disagreement on that point, but as she herself pointed out, "God wants us to have common sense, and He wants us to reason from common sense. Circumstances alter conditions. Circumstances change the relation of things."⁷ Listed below are some of the changed circumstances that have drastically altered the nature of sport and life since the nineteenth century:

Sport and Society

Sports and their impact on society have changed dramatically since the

turn of the century. From the late 1800s to the present, we have seen a remodeling of many roles. One factor that has dramatically affected sports participation is the basic work patterns of society.

The Industrial Revolution brought with it a major shift in population from the country to the city, from the long, physically taxing workday on farms to a shorter work week and more leisure. At the same time, the big business of sports evolved, producing superstars like Reggie Jackson, Dr. J, and Herschel Walker, household names whose contracts run into the millions of dollars.

Mass media has made sports more accessible to everyone, to the point where a recent survey revealed that seven out of ten Americans now read books or magazines on sports; watch a sporting event or sports news on television; read the newspaper sports section; or talk with friends about sports *every day*.⁸

The typical church member is no exception to this rule. Many Adventists can tell you exactly why the Pistons lost the basketball world championship or how many points the Redskins scored in the Super Bowl. Our students are no strangers to the world of big-time sports.

The Discipline of Physical Education

Sports had no specific place in the educational curricula prior to the turn of the century. Early educators did not understand its potential for psychological, psychomotor, cognitive, or affective development. Modern physical education, incorporating athletics and games, did not develop until well after 1900. In America early sports conducted on college campuses were often run by students without faculty guidance or involvement; Battle Creek was no exception.

SDA Physical Education

In Mrs. White's day we had no professionally trained SDA educators to monitor sports. Today the denomination has physical education teachers schooled in the discipline. These professionals are committed to maintaining a balanced, Christian perspective of sports, and in helping young people achieve lifelong physical fitness.

Sports Inside and Outside SDA Schools

Arthur White, former secretary of the Ellen G. White Estate, noted that "As the sports program developed in the schools of the world, it developed in Battle Creek. We had our football teams, our baseball teams, our basketball teams. There was even some boxing."⁹ One of the reasons Ellen White was so concerned with the issue of sports seems to have been the fact that she saw no differences between sports inside and outside Adventist education. This charge

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cannot be made against our schools today. How many SDA colleges or academies would even allow tackle football or boxing, let alone place students in charge of these and other sports programs?

Sports today in our schools are far different from those at major universities, which prepare athletes for professional careers in basketball and football, and where sports are a mul-

timillion dollar enterprise annually.

Over the years, church leaders, including Ellen White, have feared that a secular sports program might lead students away from the true mission of Adventist education. However, as Knight emphasizes:

It is not games and sports that Ellen White frowned upon, but their abuse . . . the problem lies not in the doing, but in the overdoing and misdoing of ball playing in terms of both time

and complexity of arrangements that lead to difficulties in personal relationships.¹⁰

Graybill summarized Ellen White's concern about sports as follows:

(1) the expense involved; (2) concern over the way the games were conducted; (3) the brutalizing tendency in some games; (4) the excess to which games were carried.¹¹

SDA physical educators today are also concerned that students not be

distracted from the mission of Adventist education by the secular model of sport. They also deplore the brutalizing tendency of certain types of sports, and view with alarm society's obsession with sport.

But the worldly model is not the only way sports can be conducted. Adventists have an opportunity to develop a Christian model of sport; a model that does not divert students' attention from study; a model that has as its foundation a saving relationship with Jesus Christ; that does not lead to or embrace violence as a part of the game. Such a model can incorporate a Christian perspective and avoid the hypocrisy of the "power plant complex."

Competition

Whenever the topic of sports comes up in Adventist circles, the issue of competition is certain to be raised as well. The two subjects seem inseparably linked in our minds. However, competition occurs in many other areas of our church life, though we rarely hear warnings about its dangers in connection with student recruiting, spelling bees, music festivals, grading policies, or Ingathering campaigns.

When the issue of competition is raised, scarcely anyone is neutral. What one person sees as competition, another denounces as rivalry, and a third praises as cooperation. Many people define competition as an *either-or* proposition—if one person wins, everyone else must lose. There can be only one best score, fastest time, or longest jump. This concept of competition rests upon a "strife for supremacy—to be first, the best, the most."¹²

Charles Scriven, in his series of articles, "Of Sport, Competition, and Society," correctly portrayed this concept of competition as based on the evolutionary philosophy of the survival of the fittest.¹³

Viewing it this way, many Adventists see cooperation as the only acceptable approach to sport. In cooperation, rewards are equally shared by everyone in the group, and achievement depends upon the combined effort of all concerned. Here product is deemphasized, and process receives the primary focus.

Unfortunately, rather than distin-

guishing between the "essence of sport and its institutional manifestation,"¹⁴ such people seem to have concluded that the problems are inherent in sports.

Sports have often been called a mirror of society. What does this mirror reflect? Some think that it reflects the success standard espoused by Vince Lombardi: "Winning isn't everything; it's the only thing." We have seen in the past, and continue to see today, the human carnage produced by this definition of success. Evaluating the cost of this type of winning in college sport (phony transcripts, violence and cheating, illegal drug use) Rollo May, psychoanalyst, sees a society whose ethics are ailing. "It's an illness that 'clings to money as the prop of all goals in life,' that unduly elevates winning, that makes losers vile."¹⁵

However, "the competitive coin has two sides: heads and tails, plus and minus, assets and liabilities."¹⁶ While a game, by itself, may be neutral,

our approach to the game—our attitudes, the pressures on us from outsiders, the tactics adopted by coaches, the atmosphere and environment in which the contest is staged—determines what we carry away from the game. And the vibes—good or bad—will reverberate for a long time . . . the pluses and minuses of competition *are not absolute*.¹⁷

Coaches and educators should strike a balance between an emphasis on achievement and a more balanced

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approach that encourages participation suitable for the age group and stage of athletic development of the individuals involved. Perhaps the best philosophy of sport is neither "winning is everything" nor "just have fun; how you do doesn't matter," but rather "try your best, the fun is in the trying."¹⁸

Winning Isn't Anything?

Many who have been appalled at the modern sport ethic with its overemphasis on winning, have retreated to the opposite extreme, maintaining that winning isn't anything. Both views lack balance and perspective. There is nothing wrong with wanting to win or to do one's best, but it is *having* to win and justifying anything in order to do so that causes problems. Telling students that they should just play for fun may not inspire them to do their best.

Sport does not have to be solely competitive, nor solely cooperative. It can become either product or process oriented, depending on reward structures, environment, and leadership. Competition and cooperation can have a potentially symbiotic relationship.

Physical education teachers can encourage students to pursue excellence within the context of a process that is people-oriented and morally ethical.¹⁹ They should help players learn to think beyond the winning and losing, to consider the effects of the game upon their spirit, and to examine their motives.²⁰ In such an environment a balance can exist between individuality and group cohesiveness, freedom and discipline, cooperation and competition.

This kind of balance will not occur, however, without the key ingredient of qualified leadership. This means well-trained coaches who are Christian educators, who have examined their own motives, and who see sport as one of the many ways to bring students from a casual to a purposeful existence. Coaches are needed who see the students under their tutelage not as X's and O's but as individuals who are struggling to understand who they are and where their potential lies.

Conclusion

A Christian sports program must
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⁴ ———, *Medical Ministry* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1932), pp. 48, 49.

⁵ ———, *Selected Messages* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Assn., 1958), Book 1, p. 175.

⁶ ———, *Testimonies*, vol. 7, pp. 173, 174.

⁷ ———, *The Adventist Home* (Nashville, Tenn.: Southern Publishing Assn., 1952), p. 151.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ ———, Walter S. Hamerslough, "Sports in SDA Schools," presented at the SDA-HPERA convention, Kettering College of Medical Arts, April 8, 1986.

¹⁰ Steven A. Riess, *The American Sporting Experience* (Champaign, Ill.: Leisure Press, 1948), p. 138.

¹¹ Gary Land, ed., *The World of Ellen G. White* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Publishing Assn., 1987), p. 184.

¹² Riess, pp. 168-177.

¹³ Land, pp. 186, 187.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 194, 202.

¹⁵ Riess, p. 197.

¹⁶ Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1944), p. 398.

¹⁷ *Testimonies*, vol. 8, p. 66.

¹⁸ *Testimonies*, vol. 9, pp. 208, 210, 214.

¹⁹ *SDA Education Planning Research: Preliminary Findings* (Seltzer Daley Companies, Princeton, New Jersey).

²⁰ Dr. Nelson has just accepted the position of assistant academic vice-president at Southwestern Adventist College, Keene, Texas.

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have as its educational base and mode of daily operation a commitment to each student with a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. Without this objective, we have no justification for involvement in sports. The program must exist to show Adventist young people that Jesus Christ can be the Lord of their life in all their pursuits, even in the gym or on the playing field.

Where will such a philosophy lead? It may very likely provide an opportunity to meet and participate in games with students from other schools. In this setting, visiting students are exposed to Christianity in an atmosphere of caring and sharing. For this to take place, time outside of the game environment must be provided for students to develop relationships with visiting players.

As a result, the pursuit of excellence can occur within a perspective of care and mutual respect, and students will use sport as a tool of personal Christian growth and Christian outreach.

The definition of success is critical to any discussion of sport and com-

petition. If success is defined as winning, then it follows that a win-at-any-price ethic will ultimately evolve. Opponents are seen as enemies, and players commit themselves to the absolute goal of winning. Success becomes a "cult" with violence and human destruction as potential by-products. This type of "success" has been demonstrated far too often in society.

But there is a way to define success in the world of sport so that Christians can compete with balance and perspective. This will require a new sport ethic that is built from the ground up; one that places a "premium on the Christian distinctiveness of submitting ends to means, product to process, quantity to quality, caring for self to caring for others."²¹

Competition and cooperation must be evaluated in the light of the human consequences that they produce. Competition can be positive if it is combined with perspective about the ultimate object of the participation and the relative importance of winning and losing. Sport within a Christian perspective can become a stimulating challenge to the minds and bodies of our young people, "a mutual quest for excellence in the face of challenge."²²

A Christian perspective of sport precludes adherence to the gospel according to Vince Lombardi, which defines success as winning. Instead, it should be built upon Berton Brayley's "Prayer of a Sportsman," which says, "If I should lose, let me stand by the side of the road and cheer as the winners go by."²³

Sport can and should be played as an expression of Christian sentiment.²⁴ As such it becomes an opportunity to celebrate one's relationship with Jesus Christ through movement. As musicians and artists express themselves through the medium of song and sculpture, so Christian athletes can express themselves through the medium of sport. For, as God has given the gift of teaching and preaching, of singing and sculpting, He has just as surely given the gift of running and jumping, of skipping and walking.

The challenge before the church and its educational leaders today is not to tell our young people to "go behind the power plant," but to give

leadership and direction; to provide priority and purpose; to acknowledge that playing fields, gymnasiums, and pools are laboratories in which positive changes take place in human beings. In this way, we will help our students cultivate their talents and enable them to encounter another dimension in their growing relationship with Jesus Christ, the Author of all human movement.²⁵ □

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³ Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Assn., 1980), Book 3, p. 227.

⁴ Knight, p. 23.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ S. Hoffman, "Evangelicalism and Revitalization of Religious Ritual in Sport," *Arete*, 2:2 (Spring 1985), p. 84.

⁷ White, *Selected Messages*, Book 3, p. 217.

⁸ Miller Brewing Company, *The Miller Lite Report on American Attitudes Toward Sports* (1983).

⁹ Arthur White, *Sports in Seventh-day Adventist Academies and Colleges* (Washington, D.C.: White Publications, 1967), p. 2.

¹⁰ Knight, p. 222.

¹¹ Ron Graybill, "Ellen G. White and Competitive Sports," *Ministry*, 157:7 (1974), pp. 4-7.

¹² Knight, p. 226.

¹³ Charles Scriven, "Of Sport, Competition, and Society," *Insight*, 3:31, 32, 33 (Aug. 1, Aug. 8, & Aug. 15, 1972).

¹⁴ R. L. Simon, *Sport and Social Values* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1985).

¹⁵ R. A. Smith, "Preludes to NCAA: Early Failures of Faculty Intercollegiate Athletic Control," *Research Quarterly*, 54:4 (1983), pp. 372-383.

¹⁶ G. Warner, *Competition* (Elgin, Ill.: David C. Cook, 1979), p. 53.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ R. L. Simon, *Sport and Social Values* Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1985), p. 29.

¹⁹ H. M. Barrow, *Man and Movement: Principles of Physical Education* (Philadelphia: Lea & Febiger, 1983).

²⁰ S. Hoffman, "Athletics, The Liberal Arts, and the 'Sub-Christian' Values." Recording by Center for Constructive Alternatives, Hillsdale College, Hillsdale, Michigan, October 6, 1986.

²¹ Hoffman, *Arete*, p. 83.

²² Simon, p. 29.

²³ R. Martens, *Joy and Sadness in Children's Sports* (Champaign, Ill.: Human Kinetics, 1978), p. 106.

²⁴ Hoffman, *Arete*, p. 84.

²⁵ Anthony Annarino, C. Cowell, and H. Hazelton, *Curriculum Theory and Design in Physical Education* (St. Louis: Mosby, 1980).