

Is There a Seventh-day Adventist Philosophy of Sport?



On Planet Earth, competition is an inescapable fact of life. From the nursery to the nursing home, in politics, business, school, sports, and everyday conversation, human beings compete with one another. We compete for grades, jobs, social position, friendship, money, and power—and we compete to win in a variety of sports. The virtues and vices of competition have been debated for centuries, and even today, people find experts to support their conclusions about whether competition is beneficial or detrimental.

The numerous benefits derived from athletics have been well documented—physical skills development, lessons of virtue, character development, self-discipline, teamwork, self-confidence, cooperation, etc. When participated in correctly, sports can provide an enjoyable and beneficial experience. The joy of collaborating with other players toward a shared goal, during which everyone has to give of him-

self or herself, the camaraderie that develops when people work together, the deep friendships that result—these things cannot be explained to someone who has never been a member of a team. They must be experienced.

A majority of Adventist academies and colleges/universities, at least in the North American Division, engage in interschool sports. No doubt their sponsors and participants believe that players and fans are receiving a positive experience from their participation, and that the program is beneficial to the institution.

Unfortunately, there are numerous problems with sports as practiced in many educational programs. The standard model of sports, with its philosophy of “winning at all costs,” “our team

is the greatest,” “nobody remembers a loser,” “cheating is wrong only if you get caught,” and boorish behavior by spectators, combined with unethical inducements and payments to players, granting academic credit for “fluff” courses and work done by others so that athletes can retain their eligibility, which one sees in high school, college, and university programs, must not be the model for our schools. Adventist sports programs must adhere to a higher standard, or they have no excuse to exist.¹

A Looking Glass

While certainly not the norm when the church’s schools were first established, sports have become commonplace today. Church members are influenced by the culture of the general population in which they live, so it should not come as a surprise that in nations that are obsessed with football, soccer, baseball, and/or hockey, church members will desire sports programs. While we say we want our schools to be

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different from other schools, we also want them to be like other schools. Quite a dichotomy!

Sport provides a looking glass into the souls of individuals and of societies.² Plato observed that you can discover more about a person during one hour of play than a year of conversation.³ Many sport philosophers suggest that sport is a suspension of the real—that is, we enter another world when the whistle blows, and we exit from it when the last play ends.⁴ On the contrary, I believe that sport is an extension and integral component of life itself. We work, we eat, we shop, we recreate, we worship, we play sports. These are all part of the fabric of our lives.

But for Christians, the motivating force, the behavior, and the place these things have in one's life are all the same. Some require more energy and evoke more emotion than others, but they all should be governed by one guiding principle—the life and example of Jesus Christ. If we are who we say we are, *Adventist*—those looking forward to the soon return of our Lord—then our lives must reflect this keen anticipation, and we should, with the help of the Holy Spirit, be perfecting our temperament so that we may more fully reflect Christ's character. I do not think that in the judgment God will say, "Oh, that unchristian behavior was just part of a game, so We won't count that." No! Every act and thought will be taken into consideration. What will be revealed where the events in our lives are displayed, including athletic contests? I believe we will long to hit the erase button for a number of these.

Bad behavior in sports events is in the news on an almost daily basis. For instance, there are riots in soccer matches throughout the world, recruiting violations in college basketball, brawls breaking out during football and hockey games, Little League parents beating up coaches and umpires, and athletes cheating or taking illegal

drugs to enhance their performance. Fortunately, we rarely have any such episodes in Adventist sports programs. Should we feel smug that such actions don't usually occur at our sporting events?

Fundamental Questions

The real questions we should be asking are more fundamental: *What should Seventh-day Adventist Christian sport be like? What should motivate our programs? How should our programs be conducted? What is their rationale? How do they fit into the mission of our institutions?*

Aristotle defined good character as the life of right conduct—in relation to other persons and to one's self.⁵ Virtuous behavior and caring about others is something that is learned and cultivated. The church's prophetic voice has defined the purpose of Adventist education thus: "To restore in man the image of his Maker, to bring him back to the perfection in which he was created, to promote the development of body, mind, and soul that the divine purpose in His creation might be realized—this was to be the work of redemption. This is the object of education, the great object of life."⁶

Most people think that teaching algebra, English, and physical fitness is the object of education! While these things are important, as Christian educators, our task extends far beyond merely ensuring that students acquire job skills. "In the highest sense the work of education and the work of redemption are one."⁷ "Character building is the most important work ever entrusted to human beings . . . Never was any previous generation called to meet issues so momentous; never before were young men and young women confronted by perils so great as confront them today."⁸ These words were penned around 1900. Surely their application is even more urgent and compelling today.

Cooperating in Character Development

God has ordained three primary institutions for the development and fostering of moral character—the church, the home, and the school.⁹ With regard to moral reasoning in sport, the church says little, except to advise that we not engage in it. In my mind, this is an unrealistic stance to take in the modern world, as sporting events occur everywhere, from small-town parks to huge stadiums. Sport is ubiquitous in society. It pervades newspapers, radio, and television. Adventists are spectators, fans, and players. To say that we should be celibate with regard to sport is unrealistic.

The second institution for the development of character is the home. As I observe the behavior of young men and women, I fear that most Adventist homes offer little advice on moral behavior in sports. Watching parents at games or listening to them talk about sports contests and then comparing their behavior with the teachings of Christ often makes me wonder: How can anyone who is waiting for the Lord's soon return act like that? Oh, people say, "That's OK because it's just a game." If that's true, we are in trouble. Who will train the youth about moral behavior in this area of life? It appears that the church's last hope for the development of moral behavior in regard to athletics lies with the school. If teachers fail in this regard, the same and worse moral transgressions will be perpetuated. We must not fall into the trap of saying, "I'm not paid to teach character; I'm just the physical education teacher/coach."

Higher Expectations

So what should we expect from players and spectators at school sporting events and professional games? Of course, we expect students to strive for excellence. We want our teams to be the best they can be and to perform well. But do our practice sessions look any

Significant Questions Relating to Sports Programs:

different from those at public schools? Do we pray with our teams? Do we have worship and read the Bible with them? Do we talk to our players about their relationship with Christ? Do we let them know that their salvation is more important than victories? Is their behavior and character becoming more Christlike? Are we helping them become better human beings? Can we say at the end of a season that they, and we, have a closer relationship with God?

Or . . . do we pace up and down the sidelines and yell at the officials when they make a poor call? Do we promote rough play and “pushing the limits” of the rules? Do our players help the opponents up when they are knocked down? What do we do when one of our players commits a flagrant foul? In general, is the behavior of our coaches, teachers, and athletes such that we would be happy to invite Christ to attend our schools’ games?

And what about the spectators? Generally, this is the area with the biggest problem. Of course, we want fans to cheer enthusiastically and have a good time. But does this occur in a positive manner? Do the spectators heckle and throw items onto the field when the other team scores? Do they yell at the official when they do not agree with a call? Do fans respond in a derogatory manner to an unfair act by the opposition? Do they attempt to distract an opponent shooting a free throw or up at bat? (For suggestions on dealing with spectators, see the article by Andrew Adams and Ruth Brand on page 44 of this issue.)

I dream of the time when opponents and officials will say: “At Seventh-day

- Is the spirit of Christ manifest in our games?
- Is God glorified by this activity and by my actions?
- What impressions are we making on our players, our school family, and our community—and on our opponents?
- Do others see our players and spectators as people who represent Christ—or do they see a spirit of antagonism, strife, anger, backbiting, and self-superiority?
- Do the school’s sports-related activities make a positive difference in the lives of our young people?
- Do these programs advance the mission of our institution?

Adventist schools, games are different. The athletes play hard, but they are really well-mannered. They never put down their opponents; they even compliment outstanding plays. The crowd does not jeer when a player from the visiting team is shooting a free throw. And even if the official makes a poor call, they don’t yell at him. It’s really a pleasure to play or to officiate there. They are good people. Maybe there is something to their religion.”

How to Change Behavior

Changing the behavior of athletes and spectators is difficult. After all, for years they have seen what goes on in the professional sports on TV. It takes a dedicated coaching staff, a committed athletic director, and an administration consistently working together to bring about change. Chapels, worship talks, articles in the school newspaper, and debriefing after games—all these can provide reminders of the ideal to which we aspire. And we must have supervision at games to remind us when we forget. The process is called—*education!*

I have had the responsibility for subduing unacceptable spectator noise

in our school’s gymnasium. It is not a popular or pleasant task. In fact, I abhor it. But I detest the behavior even more.

I have wondered at times if I am living in a fantasy world with regard to my philosophy of Christian sports behavior. Is it really possible to expect this kind of conduct? When I have explained what I think should occur, so many people say, “Oh, that’s just the way basketball is played; you can’t change that.” If it is not possible to expect courteous Christian behavior from players, coaches, and spectators, then the only option left is to remove varsity sports from our

schools. If they do not contribute toward the development of character and preparing students and spectators for Christ’s soon coming, then they have no place in our institutions. They are nothing but one of Satan’s clever tools to distract us from our mission.

In everything we do, the question must be asked, “Can Christ be in this activity? Can this be a positive, growing experience for students, the school, and for the community?” Each institution will have to examine this carefully.

The Seventh-day Adventist Health, Physical Education, Recreation Association (SDA-HPERA) supports the inclusion of athletics in church schools. Because sport holds such a prominent place in our world, we have a responsibility to examine its role and to educate our youth concerning the proper place of sport in our lives. What an awesome responsibility!

The SDA-HPERA, in its document, *Guidelines for Athletics in Seventh-day Adventist Institutions*,¹⁰ has articulated what this professional organization believes Seventh-day Adventist athletics should look like. It is not inevitable

that sport resemble what occurs in popular venues. The next few paragraphs are taken from the *Guidelines* to provide a summary of the thoughts and principles found therein.

“There is a Christian model of sport, and we have not totally fulfilled the mission of Seventh-day Adventist education unless we teach this model to administrators, players, parents, and spectators” (p. 2).

“Sport can result in a growing, maturing, and self-actualizing experience. However, Christian ethics must control sport. We have a responsibility to help build noble characters in students, to educate their minds, and to motivate their spirits to make our society better by applying core values to real-life situations. It is far more important to develop the whole person than to win such a comparatively insignificant thing as a game. The greatest value of sport can be its ability to enhance the character and elevate the ethics of participants and spectators” (p. 2).

“The mandate of Seventh-day Adventist schools is to educate the whole person academically, spiritually, physically, and socially A liberal education helps one become more fully human and better able to integrate religious principles into life There is no dichotomy between what is secular and what is sacred.

“Playing a musical instrument, repairing an automobile, playing a game, or preaching a sermon are all religious activities. God does not ask us only to honor Him on the Sabbath but to reflect His image everyday in whatever we do” (p. 2).

“We should weave biblical principles into all we say and do. We must cooperate with God in our acts of play as well as in our acts of Christian work” (p. 3).

“A Christian athlete should be a better-behaved athlete for being Christian. While Christians do not necessarily perform better or win more games, they are motivated by different principles and

approach activities differently from non-Christians. A Christian should be truer to the spirit of sport and to the fulfilling of its essence” (p. 3).

“The Christian spectator should also be better. Christians should be different from typical fans. They should relate to opponents and officials in the same way they would wish to be treated. Christian institutions include sport to help their graduates participate better in the culture of their society while honoring God” (p. 3).

Mission Statement

“The mission of the athletic program is to provide a setting in which students can experience the joy of movement through the medium of sport in a Seventh-day

Adventist, Christ-centered environment as they engage in activities that promote the development of the whole person physically, mentally, spiritually, emotionally, and socially” (p. 3).

Teacher-Coaches

“The success of the entire athletic program hinges on the proper selection of qualified, dedicated, and committed teacher-coaches. Above all else, the teacher-coach must be a person who values and supports the philosophy of the organization that will mold young athletes into players who emulate Christ on and off the court or field. Coaches must teach players by both word and example and must convince them that the philosophy of winning at



La Sierra University Sportsmanship Code¹¹

(For Coaches, Athletes & Spectators)

(Basketball)

- At La Sierra University, we consider all athletic opponents as *invited guests* and treat them with the courtesy due our friends and guests.
- We show respect for officials and their decisions. We do not hiss or boo a player or official.
- We applaud opponents who make good plays or show good sportsmanship. We do not utter abusive or irritating remarks from the sidelines or bleachers.
- We seek to win by fair, lawful means, according to the *spirit* of the rules. We do not attempt to rattle an opposing player, such as a player preparing to shoot a free throw.
- We follow the Golden Rule.
- We ask every player and **fan** to do their very best throughout this event to help us in living up to this code.

Thank you!

all cost or by sacrificing principle is not honorable or desirable” (p. 5).

The *Guidelines* have sections on (1) Administration: recruiting, Sabbath travel, and game policy; (2) Teacher-Coaches: qualifications, responsibilities, and behavior; (3) Student-Athletes: expectations for behavior on and off the court/field and spiritual growth opportunities; (4) Spectators: code of conduct and behavior, education; (5) Hospitality for the Visiting Team; and (6) Assessment of the Program.

Shirl Hoffman, emeritus professor at the University of North Carolina, has written an excellent article discussing steps that Christians might take to change their approach to sport. He says: “If sport played by Christians is to have a distinctive slant—especially sport sponsored by Christian institutions—it won’t simply be sport done well or played without egregious violations of the sporting code. It will be sport creatively structured and specifically crafted to express the joy of the faith.”¹²

It has been said that sportsmanship is a journey rather than a destination. Likewise, our job in a Christian school is to help students advance on their journey in spiritual living. First, we must have a personal relationship with God. We must be closely connected with the Source in order to be proper role models and promote Christlike behavior.

Assessing What’s Important

The end of all things is near. Christ is coming soon. We need to think about it, we need to pray for it, we need to plan for it. “There is nothing that the world needs so much as the manifestation through humanity of the Saviour’s love. All heaven is waiting for men and women through whom God can reveal the power of Christianity.”¹³ All that we do is recorded in heaven. We must account for all our words and actions in the judgment. At that time, will it be important that you had a winning record or that you won the league champi-

onship? Will God ask you about these things in the judgment? I think not. He will ask: “Have you brought your players closer to Me? Have you taught them how to be a follower of the Master?”

Yes, there is a Seventh-day Adventist philosophy of sport. It’s unique, stringent, and difficult to follow. However, to create the right climate in our schools, it is mandatory that it be followed. The *Guidelines* must be studied and pursued along with a diligent study of God’s Word and the works of His messenger as we seek to develop a deeper understanding of our role in hastening His soon return.

It is my prayer that coaches will provide leadership in the task of helping the church reflect Christ and to reveal His love through our athletic programs. ✍



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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Even though the church proclaimed in its widely circulated 24-page pamphlet, *Guidelines for Activities With Elements of Competition* (1976), that Seventh-day Adventists oppose an organized program of inter-organizational athletics for their schools, institutions, and churches, interschool sports have existed at least since the early 1960s. As interschool sports became more widespread, the Seventh-day Adventist Health, Physical Education, Recreation Association

(SDA-HPERA) asked church leaders to study the issue to: (1) determine if, with carefully articulated guidelines and controls set in place, interschool sports could be sanctioned by the church; or (2) to develop a policy prohibiting interschool sports and establish means to enforce the policy. Two committees (North American Division Committee on the Role of Interschool Sports in Seventh-day Adventist Academies and Colleges and an international committee) both voted to reaffirm the 1976 *Guidelines* and to raise them to the level of policy, but included a statement that allowed exceptions for schools to engage in interschool sports. The Executive Committee of the General Conference accepted the committees’ first recommendation but rejected the exception statement and recommended that interschool sports not be permitted in Adventist educational institutions. This note became policy at the 1989 Annual Council. To date, based on my long-time involvement with SDA-HPERA, I am not aware of any school that has dropped its program due to directives from the General Conference.

2. James A. Mathisen, “From Civil Religion to Folk Religion: The Case of American Sport,” in *Sport and Religion*, Shirl J. Hoffman, ed. (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics Books, 1992), pp. 17-32.

3. <http://quotations.about.com/cs/inspiration/quotes/a/play1.htm>. Retrieved October 4, 2009.

4. Kenneth L. Schmitz, “Sport and Play: Suspension of the Ordinary,” in *Philosophic Inquiry in Sport*, William J. Morgan and Klaus V. Meier, eds. (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics Books, 1988), pp. 29-38.

5. Louise B. Loomis, ed., *Aristotle: On Man in the Universe* (Roslyn, N.Y.: Walter J. Black, 1943), pp. 84, 85.

6. Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1903), pp. 15, 16.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 225.

9. Peter J. Arnold, “Sport, Moral Development, and the Role of the Teacher: Implications for Research and Moral Education,” *Quest* 53:2 (May 2001):135-150.

10. *Guidelines for Athletics in Seventh-day Adventist Institutions* (Seventh-day Adventist Health, Physical Education, Recreation Association, 2003): <http://www.lasierra.edu/fileadmin/documents/healthES/SDAHPERA/GuidelinesforSDAAthleticsFeb2004Circle.pdf>. Accessed September 8, 2011.

11. Courtesy of La Sierra University, Riverside, California.

12. Shirl J. Hoffman, “Sports Fanatics,” *Christianity Today* 54:2 (February 2010):24.

13. Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1911), p. 600.