

Why Do We Do Sports?

Metro Life Church participates in sports because of the unique opportunities it affords us to experience faith and life together, and to proclaim and demonstrate the gospel.

Sports. Politics. Money. Few things excite more passion, consume more attention and reveal more sin and idolatry than these American past times. These are things people live for, and seem to be willing to die for. They are things that require Christians to exercise wisdom when navigating the various temptations that arise.

As we participate in sports as a church, it's important that we understand why do the things that we do. Perhaps it seems that we do basketball for the sake of doing basketball. This is certainly an understandable perception, given the pervasive idolatry of sports in our culture. But we are not promoting basketball for the sake of basketball. There are virtuous things that we value as a church that the basketball program has a unique opportunity to promote.

As we prepare for another season, I wanted to take a minute to lay out a number of things that we value as Christians and as a church that basketball provides an excellent opportunity to experience and pursue.

I. Taking advantage of common opportunities for uncommon grace

The reality is that our men and women in our church are going to be playing sports whether we officially promote them or not. In our culture sports is a hobby uniquely full of temptation and opportunities for growth and discipleship. If your hobby were chess, for example this wouldn't be the case. The culture is not bombarding you with temptations to idolize chess masters. When engaged in a chess match, there's not the same social dynamic of public transparency and opportunities for simultaneous interpersonal connections with friend (teammates), foe (the other team) and authority (coaches and referees).

For much the same purpose that people would home school, to be able to have more direct contact in the midst of the educational process than they would have in the public or private schools, to better influence and inform the mind and prepare to handle temptations, we also think that providing a place for sports in the context of the church allows us to protect our members from the worldly perspectives on how to handle various temptations in sports, and provides invaluable teaching moments for those who are sufficiently discerning.

God hasn't made spiritual growth a mystery. If he had, none of us would grow. In the kindness of God, he descends to our level and relates to us in ways that we can understand. He uses even the most mundane and simple things to produce fruit by his grace. The vast majority of true spiritual growth does not take place in meetings, conferences or retreats. Although these things are valuable, most change takes place in the everyday occurrence of the routine, as God uses the simple things like jobs, schoolwork and hobbies to conform us into his image. As the Word of God is preached, inspired by the Holy Spirit to renew our minds, the transformative outworking of that Word takes place in common contexts of everyday life, such as a volleyball court or soccer field.

Recognizing that this is how God works, effective spiritual leadership and discipleship requires a high degree of sensitivity to the potency of common activities to mediate uncommon grace. As a church we have simply recognized that sports, like so many other common things, tends to provide unique access to the sanctifying grace of God, and beneficial pursuit of reality and practice of Christian virtues and our church values.

Quite simply, sports help make us like Christ. Let's examine exactly how this happens.

II. Practicing our church values

- 1. Biblical fellowship:** One of our values as a church is building relationships and biblical fellowship. God has created us in such a way that we naturally enjoy being around people with the same common interests. Although this can be used in a sinful way, by producing selfish isolation, this also provides many opportunities to build relationships that would have not otherwise been forged. The enjoyment of playing sports is shared among a vast majority of men and women. This cultural reality provides a unique opportunity to provide a context for relational building and fellowship. In the same manner of fishing trips, family vacations, birthday parties and trips to amusement parks, *playing sports sparks relationships, memories and common grace enjoyment of other people among participants in unique ways not available to those who don't participate.*
- 2. Spiritual growth:** One of the most important signs of spiritual health is our sanctification and discipleship. In God's kindness, he hasn't kept spiritual growth a mystery. He provides natural ways for us to enjoy the work of the Spirit producing the character of Christ. Our jobs provide contexts for spiritual growth. Our parenting also presents unique challenges to mortify sin. These are all avenues that our kind Lord graciously allows us to encounter, to bring us to face with spiritual growth, and allow us to see our need for discipleship. In a similar way, sports have a unique way of revealing needs for sanctification and discipleship. Few things reveal the heart more than not getting the call you want in the heat of battle at a crucial part of the game in front of a large group of people. Sports, like jobs and parenting, is a frequently used vehicle for divinely ordained sanctification and discipleship.
- 3. Outreach:** In a similar way that God uses common grace vehicles for sanctification biblical fellowship, he also uses sports and its appeal to allow Christians to interact with other non-Christians in real-life settings with great potential for the fragrance of Christ to be shared with those in need of the gospel. An individual who would never otherwise step in a church building might come to play in a gym. A wayward Christian sitting on the fence might jump back into the life of the church through the simple enjoyment of a game. For an unbeliever to witness a Christian handling a difficult game-situation with class that he never witnessed with his non-Christian friends, can present a compelling witness of the power of the gospel to individuals that would not have otherwise been looking.
- 4. Responsibility:** in addition to providing contexts for discipleship, fellowship and outreach, there are also many opportunities to grow in areas of responsibilities. Coaches and captains are entrusted with the responsibility for their team (see leadership development below). God uses game settings to entrust men and women with opportunities to handle challenges, encourage their teammates and learn valuable life lessons, particularly for

students and younger children.

5. **Teachability:** few things reveal the heart more than how teachable we are and how we respond to correction. When a referee makes a call we disagree with, our natural assumption is to assume we are right. This tendency is not limited to sports, obviously. When our bosses, spouses or church leaders say something we disagree with, our natural assumption is that our perception and opinions are right, and those who disagree with us are wrong. Whenever there is conflict, there are teachable moments, and sports are no exception. God can use moments of conflict and disagreement with officials, instruction from captains and coaches can provide invaluable lessons in being teachable, considering others opinions more valuable than our own, for those who are able to respond in a Christ-like way.
6. **Transparency:** Let's face it; anyone can look good on Sunday morning. It doesn't take much to come on Sunday, raise your hands, read along in your Bible during the message and even occasionally chime in when an "amen" at choice moments when the preacher is particularly inspired. It's a little bit more difficult to look good during "real life" situations when things don't go according to plan. An essential element to growing in character and godliness is being transparent—putting yourself in situations in which people actually see you when you are tempted and know your tendencies during those moments of temptation. Group activities like sports tend to produce a level of transparency that other social activities do not. Even in home group or other church related activities it is easy to hide for those who do not want to be transparent. Athletic competition tends to blow through the pretense, allowing people to be seen for who they really are. Sometimes it can be surprising or even embarrassing. We see things in each other that might be shocking, as people respond in ways we never thought they would. This is priceless, because it produces a level of transparency that exposes sin that had remained hidden in other settings.
7. **Accountability:** related to the issue of transparency, sports provide opportunities for accountability. Men and women, made freshly aware of one another's unique temptations, can challenge one another to confess and mortify sin and to grow. With regular games, there is also a built in mechanism of measuring progress. Players can be evaluated to see if they responded better toward the end of the season than they did at the beginning. Players who do not seem to lose progress can be challenged with real-life examples to see their need to freshly commit to mortify their sin and address their own hearts.
8. **Humility:** The opportunities for humility in sports are as endless as they are priceless. Missed shots are humbling. Sitting on the bench is humbling. Realizing how out of shape you are is humbling. Countless men have entered games with great esteem for themselves, with exponentially overstated estimation of their talent, only to have the harsh realities of age and post-graduate athletic deterioration splash in their face like cold water, rudely awakening them from the fantasy of stardom that should have died long ago. Age is no respecter of persons. Fatigue leaves no survivors. All who play will be humbled.
9. **Leadership development:** sports contexts can excel at producing opportunities for leadership development. This is particularly true for high school sports, but applies to all levels. With gifting comes responsibility. Players who are more gifted will find people naturally looking to them for direction and inspiration on the basketball court, much like they

will in the office or church later on in life. Further, valuable lessons in patience can be learned. Players who are quicker to catch on learn how to constructively lead others, resisting impatience at the lack of progress. There's also the tension of *leading while still under leadership*. Captains find the balance between being a leader on the court while remaining under the leadership of both the coach and officials. Folks who do this well on a court often find themselves doing it well at work, where they lead project teams while reporting to executives, or in church where they lead ministry teams under the leadership of pastors.

- 10. Respect for authority:** this is probably the hardest lesson to learn, both in life and in sports. We all have an innate loathing of authority. We believe that *we should be the authority*. While authority is something we tolerate when we agree with it, the slightest disagreement produces judgments in our hearts, as we begin to assume the worst motives, and self-righteously congratulate ourselves that if we were in the position of authority, we would do a much better job. This attitude arises in us when we are children and continues throughout our lives if not mortified. In all its forms, whether spiritual authority, government authority or basketball coaches and officials, authority is often suspect at best, and evil at worst. Never is this more clearly illustrated, than in countless game situations where there is a disagreement between the referees and the players about what exactly transpired during a play. Amazingly, two or three different people can look at the same play, in slow motion, and form two or three different opinions as to what happened. Players, when disagreeing with those in authority, learn valuable lessons in how to submit even it's difficult, deferring their preferences and ultimately trusting God for justice and governance.
- 11. Trust in leadership:** this is related to respect for authority, although more broad. Not only are we taught to respect authority, but to trust those God puts in leadership over us. We must learn how to trust them and believe the best about them even when they make mistakes. Christians entrust themselves to fallible people, because they recognize that all authority is established by God, who is infallible. This trust in leadership, even through the tension of conflict and disagreement in the context of sports, will provide a reservoir invaluable teaching that can be drawn upon when it really matters in life outside the court.
- 12. Strong work ethic:** God has instilled in all of us a desire to work hard at whatever we do for his glory. This ethic is bombarded with the cultural idolization of ease and lure of laziness. Sports provides a wonderful opportunity to press on when things get difficult, to not fold at the first sign of trouble and to persevere through pain and hardship. There are no guarantees. Just because you play to win, doesn't mean you will win. The very fact that all of this hard work might not pay off in the end only motivates greater effort to assure that won't happen. Principled refusal to quit in games often morphs into Christ-like endurance of hardship for a future greater good. Men will learn how to be good businessmen through sports. Women will learn how to be suitable helpers in a similar way, as God uses sports contexts to teach lessons that matter when the games are over.
- 13. Competition:** it might be surprising to see competition listed as a Christian virtue and value, given how sinful competitive people can be at times. However, simply defined as *doing something with the intent of succeeding*, competition reflects the character of God and is therefore a virtuous endeavor. Although it comes with many temptations to sin, if we can learn to navigate those temptations, we will be positioned to honor God in many ways. There is no context that better teaches us how to compete while resisting related

temptations than sports. Although this point cannot be fully developed now, this point on competition is one of the primary benefits to sports, and motivations for our churches participation in them, given the pervasive misunderstanding of this issue today.

14. Servant hood: Last but not least important, is the issue of servant hood. In a culture that teaches us that the world exists to serve the athletes, particularly the good ones, sports provides a wonderful context to serve each other. Role players give up recognition for the success of the team much like men and women will sacrifice preference and notoriety for the sake of discreet service in the church, workplace and in their families. I've wondered if Jesus was a pitcher, if he might be the setup man, never starting or taking the majority of pitches, nor closing or sharing the spotlight in the games final innings, simply serving and quietly living to bless other people. That's how Christ lived, and although it's somewhat sacrilegious to think of Christ playing American sports, the point remains: we can learn to be like Christ in the way that we defer our own interests, giving up playing time, unselfishly passing and play our role to make other people better. Lessons learned here on the court and field can be applied when it matters later on in life.

We have examined fourteen virtues and values that sports helps us pursue. What is the sum total of this: *the perseverance of the saints*. The God who saves us preserves us and maintains us, making us more like Christ until we are glorified. That's what sports can do, play a small part in that process. As we engage and change, confess and mortify, serve and relate, may the glory and fragrance of Christ permeate our lives, bringing extraordinary grace and meaning to the mundane. Isn't it amazing that our God is so wise that he can use even something as *insignificant and otherwise meaningless as sports* and transform it into a vehicle that preserves us and makes us more like him!