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## The Christian Sportsperson: An Introduction

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## **THE CHRISTIAN SPORTSPERSON: AN INTRODUCTION**

What is a Christian sportsperson? We suppose the term is at least somewhat intuitive. And the content of this special issue stems from the self-evident title. A Christian sportsperson is a Christian who engages the world of sport. While we think of athletes first, this term implies the inclusion of the many other stakeholders within sport: coaches, trainers, chaplains, fans, and those who study sport. We are exploring many of the issues confronting a Christian sportsperson with original scholarly manuscripts that speak to the ways in which the Christian sportsperson lives with tensions that can often be internalized and assuaged through theoretical reflection and deliberate practice.

This set of articles originated as presentations at the Second Global Congress on Sport and Christianity hosted by Calvin University and Hope College in October 2019. This congress included presentations from a diverse set of scholars and practitioners, as well as a tribute to the history of the Christian Society for Kinesiology and Leisure Studies. Many of the presenters at the congress had membership in or at least strong ties to CSKLS. Several themes that emerged from the presentations in 2019 considered the theoretical and practical tensions through which Christians in the world of sport have to navigate.

As such, the articles in this special issue explore these tensions of the Christian sportsperson—things like the play element, sport culture, training practices, personal identity, and professional development—from different disciplinary perspectives. The articles also explore the breadth of character within the concept of a sportsperson. The athlete is the central model, but certainly not the only sportsperson. Within the world of sport, the athlete is the focal point, the *sine qua non*, thereby holding the essential and honorific position. The coach, trainer, and chaplain guide the athlete, the administrator guides the coach, the fan observes the athlete, and the scholar studies the entire enterprise. We're presenting this series of articles for that enterprise—that which has the Christian sportsperson at the center.

John Ashley Null's article, "Towards a Theology for Competitive Sport," is written for the CSKLS membership most specifically regarding a topic germane to the world of sport. Null encourages further conversation on Shirl Hoffman's magnum opus, *Good Game*. Hoffman's groundbreaking work has forced many "sportspeople" to wrestle with their engagement in sport as Christians. Null wrestles back, focusing on one of Hoffman's suggestions for redeeming the world of sport: encouraging sport behavior toward the spirit of play. Null presents a vision of play based on Johan Huizinga and Hugo Rahner that constitutes a theocentric approach in contradistinction to Hoffman's anthropocentric approach.

This article offers a generous exploration of Huizinga, Rahner, and Hoffman, and does so within a pastoral backdrop. Null writes in a way that bridges the chasms between theology on one hand and actual sport as it is lived on the other. What does a theocentric view of play mean to the Christian Sportsperson? Null describes the fundamental formative element of play, especially that done with a God-centered theology.

Reuben Hoetmer explores sport through the lens of Rienhold Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* in his article, "Christ and Sport." Sport behavior can be interpreted (that is, understood) in many different ways. Indeed, sport philosophers have created theoretical approaches to understanding behavior within sport, prioritizing internal frameworks of rules, external conventions and norms, or combinations of the two.

The conversation among scholars espousing these varied approaches provides a framework from which to examine Niebuhr's five types of cultural behaviors as they relate to sport.

This article mirrors the ways in which others have made sense of Niebuhr's typology, a vast subset of literature, to be sure. And that provides a strong foundation on which this article stands. Hoetmer's novel approach is to adapt the typology to how we understand sport. How can we connect the proverbial dots between sport, culture, and Christ? Hoetmer's answer includes theology and philosophy, and is authentic to Niebuhr.

Elizabeth Bounds presents a perspective on training disciplines based on the theology of Dallas Willard. The novel connection in this article is between spiritual disciplines and sport training, leading to Bounds' title: "Soul-Training: The Why, What, and How of Spiritual Formation in Sports." This article is theoretical, drawing upon Willard's phenomenology-based theology of Christian formation. And yet it is also practical. Bounds concludes the article by offering concrete examples of creative ways in which athlete can engage in soul training in sport.

This article is couched in social psychology as an academic sub-discipline. The connections to Willard's practical theology, then, are novel and developmental. Bounds' original connection between these unique approaches constitutes much of the value of such an analysis. How should Christian sportspeople train? Bounds offers a robust answer that encourages both reflection and action.

Cynthia A. White and Elizabeth Bounds discuss the relationship between identity, wholeness, idolatry, and community in their article, "When Goods Become Gods: Fractured Identities and the Call for Safe Spaces in Sport." This article, also emerging from a framework within the discipline of psychology, explores broadly the concept of identity for athletes. And this is a prelude to a lamentation of the ways in which different types of messaging discourage Christian athletes from finding cohesive or whole identity within Christ.

How can coaches, trainers, administrators, and managers help a Christian athlete overcome the identity fractures that come from this smattering of idolatrous messages? White and Bounds suggest a holistic approach, encouraging the creation of safe and authentic spaces and communities. Christian sportspeople need within their lives the model and the space to experience God's love and faithfulness to prevent "identity injury" and to rehabilitate once it has occurred.

Last, the article from Jason W. Lee, Jennifer J. Kane, and Jeffrey P. Briggs, "Professional Development and Faith Integration in Sport Management Education," focuses on a less central type of Christian sportsperson emerges: that of an academic, someone who studies sport and, more specifically, someone who studies Sport Management. Despite the concentrated connection to this special issue's theme and its obvious importance to a large swath of CSKLS members in this particular field, Lee et al prescribe suggestions for the professional development of an academician that can apply to any discipline. Most notably, how does one incorporate one's faith into one's career in academia?

Lee et al describe with meticulous detail and organization how a Christian who studies sport might grow professionally. This includes a rich set of sources that have supported a broad lens toward one's professional achievement and attainment. The contours of faculty success can and should be defined by more than simply publication of peer reviewed original research articles in journals and student evaluation of teaching. The Boyer Model receives appropriate attention. What does this mean and what else should we consider? Lee and his co-authors have a variety of suggestions.

The underlying character of this special issue, aside from the variety of academic disciplines represented, is that each author engages deeply with well-known and well-respected scholars whose publications have shaped much of how we think and act as Christians, as scholars, as practitioners, and as sportspeople. Hoffman, Huizinga, Rahner, Niebuhr, Willard, Boyer, Augustine, Tillich, and many more. These articles provide novel ways to approach such well-known scholarship.

We hope that this special issue, then, on the Christian sportsperson, will engage CSKLS members in their occupational variety and in their common interests. How can we support Christians within the world of sport? Relying on well-known and well-respected thinkers is a good start, for the Christian sportsperson must engage one's faith reflectively and contemplatively. Heeding the practical suggestions

offered in these articles is another way—often overlooked or relegated in the world of academia. Yet practical suggestions are not dismissed in this special issue as beneath the value of solely theoretical publications, the crowning jewel of intellect and academic achievement. Indeed, the practical connections within this special issue remind us of the realities of our embodiment within the overlapping worlds of sport and faith, encouraging synergy and continuity of our reflective thought and our embodied action.