

Sports: a Tool for Reaching Men

--Neil Hope

"The key to friendship with God (to pleasing Him) is not changing what you do, but changing your attitude toward what you do. What you normally do for yourself, begin doing for God."

-Brother Lawrence

People today have a passion for sports, often an unhealthy passion, but a passion none the less. As of 5 years ago, 97% of Americans watched or played sports once a week. The percentage probably goes up when looking at just men. When looking at Brother Lawrence's quote, and asking, "what do American men *normally do*?" We can confidently say... "they *normally do* sports. As Christians, if we want to be about what Christ was about in seeking and saving the lost (Luke 19:10), sports are a great place to start. In fact, sports may be the most common place to find the majority of men. **The key will be to *begin doing sports for God.***

I was once asked, "What's your passion and how can it be used for God's kingdom?". Like most American men, one of my passions is playing sports. When I began to offer that passion to God... for His Kingdom, His purposes, His pleasure... lives around me began to change. Men grew from having little to no interest or knowledge of God, to having deep, committed relationships with Him. Of course this didn't happen over night. In most cases it took several years. However the result is, men who wanted little to nothing to do with God or His church, are now leading discipleship groups and teaching classes in His church, founding and leading missions, leading lunch-time Bible studies in the workplace, meeting with other men in their neighborhoods, etc. Dawson Trotter, the founder of the Navigators wrote that if one man was able to disciple two people each year to the point where they too could disciple two people a year, and this continued, it would take only 15.5 years to bring the entire world to Christ. If we reach a man with the good news of Jesus Christ we may also reach a husband and a father, and therefore perhaps a wife, a son, a daughter, a friend, their friends and the world around them.

Sports can be an effective tool in fulfilling God's mission for firstPursuit. In fact, **if the tool of sports remains in the Master's hand it can be a powerful instrument in fulfilling the five purposes God has for His church.** On the other hand, *"the same tool in the hand of a weak child, nothing. So see that it is not the instrument, but the Master's Hand that wields the instrument."* (God calling, 11/6) With that said, let's take a look at how the tool of sports can be put to work.

1. Evangelism - Sports can provide **an opportunity to reach out to men and meet them where they are**, in their area of comfort. To invite a man to come and play basketball on Monday night may be simple, whereas to get that same man to "Church" on Sunday morning may be rather difficult. When Jesus called his disciples he went to where they were, he didn't wait for them to come to him. Jesus now commands us to "Go and make disciples". In the Greek, the verb "Go" can be translated more thoroughly, "As you Go". So, like most men in America, if "as you go" means sports, then sports may be the first and most effective way to live out the great commission. We often look outside of our day to day lives in order to "do" ministry and/or to "do" evangelism, when likely we're to start right where we are.

2. Fellowship - I believe relationships are the key to fulfilling all five purposes of the church (Jesus modeled this with his disciples). However, relationships, as we know, are difficult. What's most difficult about them is that they take time. Jesus spent 24-7 with his disciples. We rarely have that opportunity. **Sports can provide a bridge of time necessary for developing relationships.** When you spend time with someone you get to know them. Whether actively trying or not, by simply spending time with someone we'll get to know them and they'll get to know us. We get to be the visible expression of the invisible God (Col. 1:15). The more of us they see, the more of Jesus they see. Jesus begins to naturally rub-off. They begin to want, they begin to ask. We've made a friend. We've captured a listening ear. We've earned the right to be heard. **We've earned the right to go deeper.**

3. Discipleship - We may have earned the right to invite them into a small group...*“Hey Joe, Tony and I are going to start grabbing some time after basketball. We’re thinking about reading through a book together and talking about it each week. It’s a chance to take a look at life and talk about some of the hard questions we might have. Would you like to join us?”* If we’ve remained in the Master’s hand and waited for His timing, the answer is usually yes. Now the real work begins...small group discipleship. With sports as an added incentive, it almost feels like you get to cheat with regard to staying committed to the relationships in that small group. You want to be there to play the sport and so do they. You have a natural weekly contact and shared experience.

4. Ministry - We’ve also likely earned the right to invite them to “church” and other church events and classes. But as friends, we don’t just send them, we go with them. We walk them through the spiritual maturity process, helping them discover their gifts, heart, abilities, personality, and experiences for ministry. The sport offers an additional weekly excuse to check-in and hold each other accountable.

At some point, as Jesus modeled, it’s time to send them on their way, to commission them in their ministry. Jesus’ first words to his disciples were an invitation to come and follow him and learn how to reach out and minister to the lives around them (Matt. 4:19). His last words were a command...now that you’re trained, go and do what I’ve taught you...**go and do with others what I’ve done with you.** (Matt. 28:19)

5. Worship - If we’ve made it this far...mission accomplished. Remember, *“The key to friendship with God (to pleasing Him) is not changing what you do, but changing your attitude toward what you do. What you normally do for yourself, begin doing for God.”* We haven’t tried to make men into something they’re not, **we’ve allowed them to become fully who they are.** *“The glory of God is man fully alive.”* (Saint Irenaeus) We haven’t expected men to just show up at the church potluck or the Wednesday Bible class. **We’ve encouraged them to begin doing what they normally do for God.** In the film Chariots of Fire, Olympic gold medal runner Eric Liddell says. *“...when I run I feel His pleasure”.* Later he says, *“To give up running would be to hold Him in contempt.”* Now that’s worship.

So, how about it men? Let’s come fully alive! Let’s begin to run, walk, shoot, serve, cut, defend, catch, slide, dive, dig, block, swing, hit, putt, kick, climb, and breath, for His glory... for His pleasure! What we normally did for ourselves, let’s begin doing for God. Nike missed it. Let’s not make the same mistake. Let’s not “Just do It”. Let’s “Do it for His Glory”!

Your own body does not belong to you. For God has bought you with a great price. So use every part of your body to give glory back to God, because he owns it. - I Cor. 6:19-20 (LB)

Sports Ministry Possibilities: Open Gyms, Tournaments, Weekends, Outings, etc. such as basketball, volleyball, tennis, softball, golf, walking, running, skating, hiking, hunting, fishing, camping, skiing, etc...