

LOVING
CHRIST
WHILE I

FOR THE
YANKEES

Sports remind us
that all earthly
pleasures are
shadows of a
richer joy that is
truly lasting.

by Peter Enns

DOES ANY OF THIS SOUND FAMILIAR? Of the five most agitating moments of the last five years of my life, two pertain to the New York Yankees. In 2001 they couldn't hold on to a 2-1 lead in the ninth inning of game seven of the World Series. They lost to the Arizona Diamondbacks. The DIAMONDBACKS! They have PURPLE uniforms, for crying out loud. Then, in 2004 against the Red Sox ... well ... if I have to explain that one, you wouldn't understand. Let's just say I finally have some empathy for nearly a century of Red Sox pain. I was hoping, though, to keep that empathy on a purely theoretical level. But, as of October 2004, the created order was nearly jarred back into its primordial chaos. I'm serious.

When the Yankees won the World Series in 1996 (for the first time since I was 17 years old), I was so happy I punched, and actually hurt, my son (then 7) whom I had allowed (forced) to sit up and watch the game with me until past midnight. He is now 6'2" and, I trust, the very picture of civility and forgiveness.

For my 40th birthday my wife cracked open a piggy bank the size of a Volkswagen and sent me to a week-long Yankees Fantasy Camp in Tampa, Fla. I wore an honest-to-goodness Yankees uniform all week—a real one—and played alongside some Yankee legends. I struck out my boyhood hero Roy White (with a backdoor curve ball)! The pictures and videos are enshrined in my living room, if any of you would ever like to come over and see.

But here's the rub. I am a Christian, and I sometimes have a hard time reconciling my devotion to sports, especially baseball, and the Yankees in particular, with my devotion to Christ. Often I have had to put on the brakes: "I can't believe what I just said!" "It's only a GAME, for heaven's sake! Drop it! D-R-O-P IT!"

DEVOTION TO SPORTS IS A CULTURAL PHENOMENON, AND CHRISTIANS ARE A PART OF IT

» Some of you are smirking, I'm sure. You're not sucked into all this. But others of you—I'll bet an awful lot of you—are thinking, "Yup, me too." For me it's the Yankees. For you it may be college bowl games, March Madness (basketball is another weakness of mine), the Super Bowl, NASCAR, hockey, tractor pulls, log-rolling, etc.

We understand each other.

Devotion to sports is, without question, an American cultural phenomenon, and Christians and non-Christians alike are a part of it. Sports gets its own section in any newspaper, and many of you (you know who you are) turn there first. In fact, depending on the season or local sports happenings, it is the first thing you do when you get up in the morning.

It's an international issue as well. At Westminster Seminary I occasionally overhear my British and Australian brothers debate

cricket. Even though I can't follow the logic of the game, I have to say these guys are insane. Sometimes I begin to say, "Guys, c'mon. How can you be so into a silly ga—" and then I see my brazen hypocrisy. I have come too close to that which I loathe—and I repent.

WE NEED SOME THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

» What is it about sports? What is so attractive that it cuts across not only religious lines but hurdles national, racial, generational, socioeconomic, educational, political, and other barriers as well? If Terrance Mann in *Field of Dreams* is right, that the "one constant through all the years has been sports," what does it mean for the Christian fan to participate in such a phenomenon?

A sociologist might argue that devotion to sports is an archetypal, primitive instinct of some sort. That's of little help to me in understanding why I am "in the zone" during the American League playoffs. We need some theological reflection on the issue—not a flimsy "biblical" defense for sports fanaticism in the Christian life, nor an assumption that there is a major spiritual defect with those who love playing and watching sports. Let's probe a bit deeper to reflect theologically on what it is about sports that is so universally attractive, and how the gospel addresses it.

THERE HAVE BEEN FANATICS FOR THOUSANDS OF YEARS

» Sports have been around since centuries before Christ. Did the ancient Israelites have an inclination toward sports? The Bible is mercifully silent on the matter. For ancient Greeks, athletic contests were a form of religious devotion directed toward the gods or dead warriors. By participating in sports—wrestling matches or chariot races around a soldier's funeral pyre—ancient athletes were not just getting some exercise and trying to collect trophies for their mantles; they were honoring the gods. They were also honoring their dead warriors by recreating their struggles through athletic contests and thus participating in those

THE ANSWER IS NOT TO KEEP AWAY FROM SPORTS. RATHER, IT IS TO "TAKE SPORTS CAPTIVE AND MAKE THEM OBEDIENT TO GOD."

struggles. (Greek "agon," from which we get our word "agony," can mean both struggling and an athletic contest.)

The Greeks' devotion to sports makes our video camera-armed, minivan-driving soccer moms, and Sunday morning tailgating men with bare chests painted in team colors in sub-zero temperatures look a bit tame, don't you think? That is some consolation to me: People have had this over-the-top thing for sports for thousands of years.

As I see it, competitive sports is as universal a part of the human drama as—and here I would apologize in advance to my more culturally sophisticated friends—art, music, war, politics, and literature. Sports inspire at least as visceral a commitment as any of these other things (when was the last time you saw a tailgating party before an orchestra performance?). I guess it should be no surprise that Christians participate with gusto in this "cultural universal."

A SOURCE OF JOY THAT POINTS TO SOMETHING HIGHER » Why are sports so appealing? First, athletic contests are just plain enjoyable. Even apart from the adrenaline rush of competition, the familiar rhythms of a sport are very enjoyable to those who love it. The grip of a bat, the mechanics of catching a ground ball, the simple ebb and flow of the baseball year—these are things that connect with any baseball person, and this feeling hangs on long after one's playing days are over.

For all we know, the Lord does not give a hoot about baseball or any sport, but He does care about us. And it is important for us to be aware of this deep connection we feel with sports and to be honest about it. It is more than just "fun," like a momentary and superficial rush of a roller coaster. For some, like me, it is a source of joy, in the same way C.S. Lewis used the word. Joy is a word he uses to describe something that sparks in us a longing for something eternal (independent of whether we realize it at the time). "Oh please," you might say, "Isn't that taking a sport a bit too seriously? What does joy have to do with a stupid game? Joy in art, music, a good book, a good meal, a

beautiful landscape, these are fine, but sports are so ... well ... physical, earthy, mundane, silly."

Don't sell the Lord short. He can and will use anything in His creation to bring us to a deeper knowledge of Him. For Lewis, his first experience of such joy (or what he would later understand to be joy) was as a small child, when his brother constructed a toy garden out of twigs and moss stuck to the lid of a biscuit tin. It sparked in the young Lewis a longing for beauty that he would not understand until nearly 25 years later, after his conversion. As he put it, "As long as I live my imagination of Paradise will retain something of my brother's toy garden."

Not very dramatic at all, a biscuit tin. Quite mundane, in fact. Sports are equally mundane, but no less a source of joy for some. When I am "pumped" after a great win, or have a simple sense of contentment playing catch in the backyard, or just sit in the stands overlooking a stunning green field with a deep blue sky overhead, I try to remember that this joy exists to point to something higher. I do not chastise myself for feeling good about something so "unholy" as a sport. Rather, I remember—as Lewis learned early in his life, and which later pervaded his writings—that all of creation belongs to the King, and He uses any means to remind His people that all earthly pleasures are just shadows of a much richer joy that is truly lasting. For Christians, such joy is a reminder of what we have already begun to know in Christ. For non-Christians, it is a bit of grace to show them, as it was shown to Lewis, that their earthly source of joy will always disappoint if not fulfilled by the real thing.

Christians, of all people, are able to understand that these moments of joy do not exist in and of themselves, and that it is wrong, even idolatrous, to imagine that they do. It is because we understand God's sovereignty over all of creation and the provisional nature of earthly joy that we are able to celebrate that provisional joy in a more meaningful and full sense than nonbelievers. These moments of joy serve God's purpose to lead us onward and upward.

What separates us from sports fans who do not know Christ is not necessarily that we are more sober and therefore aren't caught up in all the nonsense, or that we have a better perspective that "none of this eventually matters," and so we're above it all. We should certainly have a better perspective than others by not allowing sports to define our existence. But such a perspective is not gained by suppressing our joy for sports, but rather by training that joy to perform God's purpose.

Christians can do this because we have a true and saving

knowledge of the One who is the source and fulfillment of all temporal joy, and so we can embrace whatever shadow of true joy we experience here and now. I know how God made me and what makes me tick. And when I am true to that, I feel such a tremendous sense of satisfaction, pleasure—joy—that I can only conclude that this, too, is from God and points me to Him. It is His pleasure.

So we should seize and embrace all earthly, mundane experiences of joy to remind ourselves of God and His joy. Indeed, perhaps God has placed these experiences in our path for that very purpose.

WHEN HAVE WE GONE TOO FAR? » When have we gone too far in our sports devotion? When do we cross the line from a God-centered joy about an activity we love to one that hinders us in our spiritual journey? There is nothing inherent in sports that makes it more prone to abuse. Any human activity, no matter how pious it might appear, can lead one down the wrong road.

Especially as Reformed men and women, who have a robust understanding of God's ownership over all of His creation—every square inch of it—

sion; it's become an end in itself, the very thing by which all other things are measured and determined. It has become an idol. So I preach to myself, "This is what my prayer life should be—an undercurrent that invades all my other activities." I choose to replace "think about sports continually" with "pray continually" (1 Thessalonians 5:17).

But the answer is not to keep away from sports. Rather, it is to "take sports captive and make them obedient to Christ." What transforms sports devotion into a transforming activity is no different than anything else—a Christlike posture of knowing that all we do will either move us further along the journey or drive us back. Where one ends up in this spiritual journey is determined by that delicate and well-known balance between God's unmerited grace that fuels all of our lives, and our disciplined commitment to live in a manner consistent with that grace. We work toward this balance by humbly cultivating a life of devotion in prayer, Christian community, study of Scripture, and service.

AS I SEE IT, COMPETITIVE SPORTS IS AS UNIVERSAL A PART OF THE HUMAN DRAMA AS ART, MUSIC, WAR, POLITICS, AND LITERATURE. SPORTS INSPIRE AT LEAST AS VISCERAL A COMMITMENT AS ANY OF THESE OTHER THINGS.

we cannot single out such things as sports as being somehow further away from God's throne than other pursuits. The negative things that can be inspired by an unhealthy devotion to sports can also be a liability in any other human activity.

I have developed a simple rule for myself: When I have allowed the emotions of a contest, whether anger or elation, to occupy me for more than a few hours, I know I've gone too far. I know even a few hours can seem over the top for those who do not share this attraction to sports, but it is a pretty big step for some. Increasingly, it works for me.

Or, I know things are getting out of hand when a sports-related event, either past or upcoming, dominates not only my emotions but my thinking. The two cannot be easily separated, but it is helpful to make the distinction. I have noticed that at certain times, especially after a dramatic loss of some sort, I may be reading, or cutting the grass, or on the phone with my mother, and rather than being "there" in the moment, there is an undercurrent that invades my thinking regardless of the surface activity. When I cross that line, sports has become more than an obses-

That is what will enable us, more and more, to bring every part of our lives under Christ's reign.

A theologian recently wrote that what the church needs desperately is a theology of things such as sleep, eating, working, and leisure. I would add sports to the list. As Christians we need to cultivate an attitude of theological reflection about those very things that fill up most of our daily hours. Very often it is the mundane, everyday things that most persistently—and subtly—affect us in our Christian walk, for good or ill.

If you're like me, sports is one of those topics that deserves serious theological reflection. Perhaps the sooner we get started, the better off some of us will be—although I'll understand if you want to wait until the game is over. ☞

DR. PETER ENNS IS PROFESSOR OF OLD TESTAMENT AND BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS AT WESTMINSTER THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY. HE IS THE AUTHOR OF SEVERAL BOOKS, INCLUDING *EXODUS* (NIV APPLICATION COMMENTARY, ZONDERVAN) AND *INSPIRATION AND INCARNATION: EVANGELICALS AND THE PROBLEM OF THE OLD TESTAMENT* (BAKER). HE IS A RULING ELDER AND VISITING SCHOLAR AT TRINITY PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (PCA) IN RYE, N.Y.