The Importance of Play & Sport in Youth & Young Adult Ministry

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*“God has placed us in the arena of [God’s] world, and we are to play our parts by living for [God’s] glory no matter what comes our way. God kindly provides us the window of smaller arenas where we can be challenged to demonstrate the virtues necessary for faithfulness in the ultimate arena of our lives before God, our Creator and Sustainer. The Bible offers athletic competition as one of those many windows; it is a biblical metaphor with which many people today have the most direct experiential contact. The smaller arena of sports is one way we can have our physical and moral courage tested. Sports provide limited and temporal consequences with the pressure of success and failure. Athletic competition provides practice games for life, whether experienced by participation or observation, but to benefit fully, we must be intentional about the lessons [sports] can teach us.”[[1]](#endnote-1)*

David E. Prince

*In the Arena*

I, like most people, love sports!! I also thoroughly enjoy coaching! I have been involved with playing sports and involved in sports for as long as I can remember, my entire life basically; well, at least since the age of five. In every decade of my life I have played sports recreationally and competed as an athlete. I have also been coaching for 38-years, multiple sports, but mainly wrestling for that time, but also at least 15-years of little league baseball. Most Americans, and therefore, most Christians enjoy watching or participating in some type of sports. Think of youth soccer and the sheer number of children and youth who play soccer in the United States, not to mention the millions, if not billions of children and youth who play soccer around the world.

Christian theologians spend a lot of time researching, writing, and teaching about theology, ethics, sexuality, liturgy, sacraments, and spirituality, and albeit these subjects within theology are extremely important, they are not the totality of theology. There are not many theologians who spend their time researching and writing about the theology of sport or sports impact upon Christians. This seems odd to me because of the magnitude of sports that are played and watched around the globe, but for some bizarre reason, sports has not really been entertained as a serious subject by many Christian theologians.[[2]](#endnote-2)

In this article, I will to accomplish four things: (1) discuss briefly the distinction between play, game, and sport, (2) articulate a theology of sport, (3) address the placement of sport in youth & young adult ministry and (4) describe the ways theology of sport impacts and influences youth & young adult ministry.

**Play, Game, and Sport**

Sports are important for several reasons: creating discipline, character development, identity formation, mental toughness, and physical fitness. People think different things about sports in general and about certain sports in particular. From a Christian standpoint, it may be prudent to articulate a theology of sport for the purposes of this essay, but perhaps it may be best to define play and sport before theologizing about sport.

The term *play* comes from the Anglo-Saxon word *plega,* which originally referred to the free bodily movement of exercise or recreation, as well as the pleasure or joy found in such movement.[[3]](#endnote-3) Therefore, play is a spectrum or range of intrinsically or inherently motivated activities done for pleasure, enjoyment, and recreation. Typically, when it comes to simple play or playing, there are no set of rules. Play is for fun; play is for pure pleasure, play is for freedom.[[4]](#endnote-4) Play is for its own sake! Think of elementary children who enjoy mid-day recess merely for the fact that it is freedom from the classroom and it is fun. Children jump rope, play Hop-Skotch, and Freeze Tag, and an assortment of other physical activities on the “playground” for a short period of time. Accordingly, then, recess in schools is for children to have fun!

The Dutch historian Johan Huizinga (1872-1945) maintains that play lies at the very heart and soul of every human culture. For Huizinga, play is much more ubiquitous and fundamental than the typical view that isolates in only in childhood. He states, “Culture arises in the form of play. . . [Culture] is played from the very beginning, and through playing a culture expresses its interpretation of life and the world.”[[5]](#endnote-5) Huizinga does not offer an exact definition of play, but that play is an important element within human culture.

Intentional play leads to game or games being played by more than one person. The term *game* comes from the Latin word *ludum,* which means *play, prank,* or *contest.* Typically, most people think of board games, playing cards, or playing Checkers or Chess when the word *game* comes to mind. Game is play with rules and it is more than aimless frolic or play, it has some element of competition involved. For example, I live in Indiana, and yesterday, I watched my nine-year old son go snow-sledding with some of his buddies. After sledding, a snowball fight ensued, eventually the played turned into a game because the boys put some rules in place, such as “if the person catches the snowball the person who threw it is out“ and “if the snowball hits you in the head, then the person who threw it is out.” Therefore, the play turned into a game.

French sociologist Roger Caillois (1913-1978) focused on play and games, he suggests that games fall into four basic categories: (1) games of chance, (2) games of make-believe, (3) games that stimulate exhilaration, disorientation, and vertigo, and (4) contest-games that require speed, endurance, agility, physicality and mental skills.[[6]](#endnote-6) *Games of chance* can be played by children, youth, and adults and are games such as, Chutes and Ladders, Blackjack, Roulette, Craps, and Monopoly. *Games of make-believe* are games usually played by children and include doctors and nurses, cowboys and Indians, cops and robbers, and tea parties. *Games that stimulate exhilaration, disorientation, and vertigo* can be enjoyed by both children and youth alike and include activities such as, spinning in a circle, playing tag, climbing trees, Musical Chairs, Pogo Stick jumping, and Leap Frog. This category for adults might include rock climbing, snow skiing, and skate boarding. *Contest-games* that require speed, endurance, agility, and physical and mental skills are equally enjoyed by children and youth and include running, skipping, jumping rope, Hide and Seek, Dodgeball, Four-square, and kickball and are also considered recreational activities.

As aforementioned, the distinguishing factor between play and games are rules and guidelines. Games, whether it is board games or physical games there are usually established rules for people to abide. If game is play with rules and guidelines, then sport is game with completion with boundaries and referees, and the competitors are called *athletes.[[7]](#endnote-7)*

One contemporary U.S. definition of sport is: **“an activity involving physical exertion and skill in which an individual or team competes against another or others for entertainment.”**[[8]](#endnote-8) English theologian Robert Ellis argues that, “Sport gathers up elements of the definition of play and adds to it a bureaucratized embodied contest involving mental and physical exertion and with a significant element of refinable skill.”[[9]](#endnote-9) Beyond Ellis’ definition, sport also involves contest and competition with athletes. It is the competitive activity either between individuals or teams competing to win the contest with rules, guideline, and officials that moves sport beyond play and game.

Surrounding the sport are other integral facets such as, relationships, commerce, media, consumerism, and finances, which help govern and complicate sports, especially professional sports. All of these aspects of sport necessitate the need to develop and articulate a theology of sport in Christian literature.

**Theology of Sport**

There ought to be standard definition for the theology of sport, but there is no standard explanation or definition that theologians can agree upon. Although many theologians have written on the topic, it is still an elusive topic that merits serious theological discourse.[[10]](#endnote-10) I am not sure if those theologians have fully succeeded. For that reason, I will “throw my hat into the ring” and attempt to give an explanation, or at least, define theology of sport.

Defining and describing a theology of sport is tricky business. Conventional wisdom maintains that sport is neutral, that is, sport is neither good nor bad. Sport does have the potential to be good, especially if it is used for higher purposes such a spiritual formation, moral training, and as a tool to catechize and evangelize.[[11]](#endnote-11)

In the Christian tradition, if sport is to have any authentic semblance of theology, then it must involve God and the person of Jesus of Nazareth. This is the real crux of the issue; trying to keep God as the ultimate focus of meaning and purpose in sport.[[12]](#endnote-12)

The late German, Jesuit, theologian Hugo E. Rahner (1900-1968) argues that sport is organized play and that it has four fundamental theological components. I paraphrase and summarize his work here: (1) God plays in creation, thus humanity is created to join God and other human beings in play when playing sports; (2) the sports which people play are gifts from God and essentially the sport people choose is not really their choice, but God’s, and is part of the human participation in the creation enterprise and such participation creates order, meaning, and purpose; (3) since God’s governing participation draws humanity towards the love of Christ, ideally the drive and motivation in athletes for sport is the desire to reconnect with God and to unite with God’s vision and plan; (4) because all healthy human activities are grace-filled moments, they are directed towards harmony of body and soul, thus, play as play and sport as sport, are good for the Christian life.[[13]](#endnote-13)

More recently Pope Francis has given a declaration of sport. In his 2016 opening address to the “Sport at the Service of Humanity” Conference at the Vatican, Pope Francis declares the importance of sport. The Holy Father states,

Sport is a human activity of great value, able to enrich people’s lives; it is enjoyed by men and women of every nation, ethnic group, and religious belonging. . . The Olympic motto *“altius, citius, fortius”* [higher, faster, stronger] is an invitation to develop the talents that God has given us. … When [sport is played] like this, sport transcends the level of pure physicality and takes us into the arena of the spirit and even of mystery. . .  There is also sport for pleasure, for amateurs, for recreation, not aimed at competition, but allowing all to improve their health and wellbeing, to learn to be a part of a team, knowing how to win and also how to lose. . .  I wish to encourage all of you--institutions, sporting societies, educational and social organizations, religious communities--to work together to ensure these children can take up sport in circumstances of dignity, especially those who are excluded due to poverty. . . I trust that these days of meeting and reflection will allow you to explore further the good that sport and faith can bring to our societies. I entrust to God all that you do, every hope and expectation, and from my heart invoke his blessing on each one of you; and I ask you, please, pray for me.[[14]](#endnote-14)

The pope’s words ring true for millions, if not billions, of people around the globe. Theologically, then, sport is a vehicle for the common good and an endeavor that brings about human joy and enthusiasm.

The Vatican document on sport titled *Giving the Best of Yourself: A Document on the Christian Perspective on Sport and the Human Person*[[15]](#endnote-15) indirectly lays out a Christian framework for a theology of sport. In chapter 3 of the document, entitled “Significance of Sport for the Human Person,” highlights several components that help to weave together a theology of sport. The document addresses ten characteristics of sport that enhances the human person. I will briefly describe each of the ten components.

**The 10 Components for a Theology of Sport**

1. ***Body, Soul, Spirit:*** God has created the human person is a union of body, soul, and spirit, and as such there is both a physical and spiritual dimension to sport. As Pope John Paull II (1920-2005) notes, athletic activity or sport is a “form of gymnastics of the body and of the spirit.”[[16]](#endnote-16) Sport strengthens the body, soul, and spirit in ways that enrich our human experience.
2. ***Freedom, Rules, Creativity, and Cooperation:*** All human beings are created in *imago Dei* (human beings created in the image and likeness of God) and as such should enjoy freedom is a gift from God. Moreover, human beings are free to compete in sports and cooperate in the rules that encourage fair-play, which empower creativity and spontaneity in sport.[[17]](#endnote-17)
3. ***Individualism and Team:*** Play and sport are both an individual exercise, but also cooperate or communal in scope. The reality of team and teamwork in sports is paramount. There are many team sports in existence today: softball, hockey, baseball, soccer, football, volleyball, and so on, and the goal is to compete and win as a team not as an individual. Pope Francis remarks, “To belong to a sports [team] means to reject every form of selfishness and isolation, it is an opportunity to encounter and be with others, to help one another, to compete in mutual esteem and to grow in [friendship].”[[18]](#endnote-18) Moreover, there are individual sports, such as wrestling, boxing, fencing, swimming, skiing, tennis, and golf, and there is always a common goal that each individual contributes and strives for to help the team compete and win.
4. ***Sacrifice:*** Anyone who has played a sport at a high level knows from person experience that a great deal of sacrifice is demanded. Sacrifice involves various dimensions such as humility, self-denial, self-control, and hardship.[[19]](#endnote-19) In sport, people experience physical, psychological, and spiritual challenges that must be overcome in order to develop and succeed in a particular sport. Pope John Paul II states that there is similar logic in life and in sports: “without sacrifices, important results are not obtained, or even genuine satisfaction.”[[20]](#endnote-20) Sacrifice is necessary in the Christian life and sports.
5. ***Joy:*** One of the great truths and beauty of sports is the joy that it brings to those participating in them. Young and old find joy in play and sports. A father throwing a softball with his daughter; a mother playing golf with her son; entire families enjoying a professional hockey game. Joy in these various sporting contexts is a result of participating in something that people thoroughly enjoy. Joy, like faith, is a gift from God. The person who plays sport is rooted in God’s love. Sport is also joyful because it can develop and grow deep personal relationships in the pursuit of a common goal. Joy is a byproduct of playing sport.[[21]](#endnote-21)
6. ***Harmony:*** Having positive well-being and striking a balanced in one’s life is essential for having authentic harmony. Harmony involves various dimensions of health: physical, moral, psychological, sexual, social, and spiritual. Pope John Paul II reminds athletes of harmony, “You are *true athletes* when you prepare yourselves not only by training your bodies, but also by constantly engaging the spiritual dimensions of your person for a *harmonious development of all your human talents.”[[22]](#endnote-22)* For Pope John Paul II, a person can only be a true athlete if harmony exists within the person’s life, which involves the total person: mind, body, and spirit.
7. ***Courage:*** It has been said that courage represents a mean-point or medium between cowardice and recklessness. Saint Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274) maintains that the brave or courageous person stands firm amidst danger, and therefore, displays fortitude or moral courage.[[23]](#endnote-23) Sometimes during a sporting competition an athlete is required to display courage: do the right thing, make a good decision, and/or take the “high road” and not the easy way out. Catholic theologian Richard P. McBrien (1936-2015) maintains that the virtue of fortitude or courage empowers people to overcome a natural fear in order to pursue the just or the good.[[24]](#endnote-24) Oddly enough, for the athlete, courage is experienced more before, during, and after defeats, losses, or setbacks.[[25]](#endnote-25)
8. ***Equality and Respect:*** The Judeo-Christian principle of *imago Dei* is the bedrock of giving each and every person dignity and respect. Sport is a place where diversity, equity, and inclusion are best represented and promotes equality among race, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, and gender. Again, all people are equal in the eyes of God because of their inherent dignity as created *imago Dei.* Pope Benedict 16th (1927-2022) maintains, “Sports can bring us together in the spirit of fellowship between peoples and cultures. Sports are indeed a sign that peace is possible.”[[26]](#endnote-26) Hence, sport is the public arena that Christians can promote and live-out equality and respect towards every person.
9. ***Solidarity:*** When people demonstrate support for another or for a cause they are showing solidarity. The Christian principle of solidarity allows for athletes to resonate with each other in practice and competition because they experience similar sacrifice and enjoyment pursuing the same goal in sports. Ideally, in sport, solidarity should be shown to members of the opposite team as well, such as helping a fallen player off the ground.[[27]](#endnote-27) Pope Francis remarks, “Put your [sport] at the service of the encounter between persons, of friendship, and of inclusion.”[[28]](#endnote-28) Solidarity in sports is not supposed to be a lofty ideal, but an activity that undergirds athletes radiate their best selves to promote unity among all peoples and to overcome jealousy, hatred, and unnecessary violence.
10. ***The Quest for Ultimate Meaning:*** Sport exposes people with the joy of victory and the agony of defeat. In sport, individuals experience the highs and lows of the human condition and existence by experiencing both power and fragility. “Sport is a realm within which humans can authentically live out their talents and their creativity, but at the same time experience their limitations and finitude, as success is by no means guaranteed.”[[29]](#endnote-29) This means that humans can experience pure joy and elation through sport, but also may experience an existential crisis if there happiness is only tied to sport. Authentic happiness and joy in the Christian tradition comes by way of experiencing God’s grace and mercy and by turning to and following God’s son Jesus of Nazareth who is the Christ.

These ten characteristics of sport add to the overall understanding and articulation towards a theology of sport.

Sport has never been more popular in the United States and around the world as it is today. There are many church-based sport clubs and athletic associations around the country. Where I live and work in Indianapolis, there are Christian denominational affiliations with sports: Catholic Youth Organization, Baptist Athletic League, and dozens of Christian high schools that offer a variety of competitive and intramural sports. There are also plenty of religiously affiliated colleges and universities throughout the state of Indiana that have dozens of varsity athletic teams and intramural sports teams. Therefore, it is only reasonable and logical that sports would trickle into youth and young adult ministries within our Christian congregations as well.

**The Placement of Sport in Youth & Young Adult Ministry**

It is the conventional practice and the common experience of youth and young adult ministers is to use some type of game in their ministries throughout the year. As a former youth minister, I used to play games such as broom hockey, dodgeball, freeze tag, Twister, and plenty of board games. As a youth minister, I also played sports with those students who were more athletic or who wanted to play something more competitive: football (flag and tackle), soccer, basketball, and baseball/softball. Moreover, as a youth minister, I would always try to watch as many of the sporting (and non-sorting) activities that my students were engaged in through their high schools.

As a college campus minister and young adult minister, I used sport as a catechetical and evangelical tool. I developed programs such as Bible Bootcamp, in which 30-minutes of calisthenics or physical exercises took place before a 30-minute Bible study. We also formed 4 or 5 co-ed softball and basketball teams that played each other in a round-robin format as various times of the year. There was always a short spiritual and inspirational message given by someone after each game.

The placement of sport in youth & young adult ministry is an essential component to help facilitate religious experiences and ministry effectiveness. Utilizing sport as a leisure activity has the potential to offer youth and young adults the opportunity to expand their spiritual horizons.[[30]](#endnote-30) Sport in youth & young adult ministry affords young people the opportunity to experience fun, joy, and entertainment.

Anglican theologian Lincoln Harvey states, “People will always play sports, because people will always be playful.”[[31]](#endnote-31) Ministry with young people is about building deep relationships and strong community; playing games and sports help young people remain youthful and it also builds friendships within the youth and/or young adult community.

When young people engage in sport in the context of youth & young adult ministry they are celebrating their freely determined form of play as people created in *imago Dei* through a freely determined, rule-governed, unnecessary-but-meaningful activity for fun.[[32]](#endnote-32) This understanding of play and sport within the context of youth & young adult ministry is a celebration of playfulness, youthfulness, and joyfulness.

**The Impact and Influence of Sport in Youth & Young Adult Ministry**

Does play and sports impact and influence youth & young adult ministry? Yes, in several ways. First, the overwhelming majority of youth & young adult ministries that I have witnessed over the years, play games and/or play sports within their ministries regularly. From ice-breakers to touch football games, play and sports are part of youth & young adult ministries across the United States. Second, sports in youth & young adult ministries helps to develop friendships, build community, and foster character, which are all admirable qualities within ministry. Third, sports utilized in youth & young adult ministries is an excellent tool for cultivating spirituality, bolstering Christian discipleship, and an instrument for catechesis (religious formation) and evangelization (mission). It is this last category that will be explored in the following pages.

**As a Means of Cultivating Spirituality**

Cultivating Christian spirituality has long been a part of youth & young adult ministries. Christian spirituality is a broad and deep discipline, and an important one for young people to encounter and develop. Defining and describing spirituality for youth and young adults is complicated and is nearly impossible. However, for the purposes of this article, a spirituality for youth & young adult ministries is broadly defined as a *portion or “slice” of Christian spirituality that directly caters to the human, intellectual, emotional, pastoral, and spiritual needs of young people.[[33]](#endnote-33)*

Since the above definition is comprehensive, sport can be activities that are easily integrated into youth & young adult ministries. Sport in ministry ideally emphasizes physical activities and bodily experiences that will positively impact young people on a level of mind, body, and spirit. In the words of the famous German-American, Lutheran, theologian Paul Johannes Tillich (1886-1965), all spirituality and faith is fundamentally concerned with the Good, the True, and the Beautiful, which of course is God.[[34]](#endnote-34) For Tillich, faith and God is the ultimate concern of humans.[[35]](#endnote-35) Therefore, cultivating spirituality through sports, is the human state of being grasped by an ultimate concern, which is God.[[36]](#endnote-36)

Sport can enhance a young person’s spirituality and interest in ministry by simply playing a game or sport. Sports in middle school, high school, and college has become so competitive and specialized that it is important to recover playful and joyful element of sport. Youth & young adult ministries have the capabilities of putting enjoyment and fun back into sports because it is played at an intramural and non-competitive way. Enjoyment is a key part of youth & young adult ministries. When a parent asks his teenager, “how was youth ministry tonight?” And, the teenager responds back saying, “it was fun.” Then the parent knows that the teenager had an enjoyable time and that enjoyment increases spirituality.[[37]](#endnote-37)

Beyond the traditional components in youth & young adult ministries: prayer, witness talks, retreats, youth rally’s, and many other excellent activities which bolster spirituality, sport can also cultivate spirituality due to the bond that playing sport can bring. Jesuit theologian Patrick Kelly maintains that young people who play sport, build community and this type of togetherness has always been fundamentally important to deepening spirituality.[[38]](#endnote-38) Young people who play sports in their church ministries will find pleasure and enjoyment that comes from playing something for its own sake, and this is a good endeavor in its own right, and this good comes directly from God.[[39]](#endnote-39) The good from playing games and sports in youth & young adult ministries helps to cultivate Christian spirituality and discipleship.

**As a Method of Christian Discipleship**

Sports can be used as a method or an approach to foster Christian discipleship. Christian discipleship is a comprehensive, life-long process that involves many categories such as, biblical literacy, community, conversion, faith, leadership, morality, prayer, service, spirituality, and stewardship, just to name a few.[[40]](#endnote-40) Christian discipleship can be fostered in a small group, one-on-one interactions, and through larger community gatherings. Sports or athletic activities in youth & young adult ministries has the potential to nurture discipleship in young people.

The Catholic youth ministry document, *Renewing the Vision: A Framework for Catholic Youth Ministry* states that Christian discipleship is the number one goal of all youth ministry: “To empower young people to live as disciples of Jesus Christ in our world today.”[[41]](#endnote-41) The document does not go into specifics methods on shaping or molding young Christian disciples; therefore, sports in youth & young adult ministries is fertile ground cultivating youth and young adult disciples. The document goes on to read, “All ministry with adolescents [and young adults] must be directed toward presenting young people with the *Good News of Jesus Christ* and inviting and challenging them to become his disciples.”[[42]](#endnote-42) One of the tasks of youth & young adult ministry is to foster Christian discipleship and sports are a way to help achieve this task.

One of the paths to accomplish discipleship is the accompaniment. The term *accompaniment* has become a buzzword in Catholic ministry circles and I am not sure if it has encroached upon Protestant ministry circles or not. Accompaniment burst onto the world scene with Pope Francis’ papal apostolic exhortation titled *Evangelii Gaudium*, where he states the Church needs to invest in the “art of accompaniment.”[[43]](#endnote-43) Accompaniment in youth & young adult ministries is extremely necessary because it provides young people with mentorship, listening sessions, and can be added to almost any discipleship endeavor, especially sports. I describe accompaniment to my ministry students as a mentor and mentee process that involves pastoral care & counseling, spiritual direction, moral guidance, and vocational discernment.

One recent document on youth & young adults states that “true accompaniment is needed right now for young people. . . and that true accompaniment requires us to minister to the person, not a program.”[[44]](#endnote-44) Therefore, accompaniment with young people might be a pick-up soccer game in the backyard of the church that a youth minister uses to draw in teenagers to the ministry. Accompaniment has potential to deepen discipleship in young people through one-on-one mentoring or through faith-sharing groups and discussion before or after the soccer game is played. It is this type of fun activity, genuine relationship-building, and pastoral care that can be implemented as a method of fostering Christian discipleship in young people and it can also be utilized as a pastoral strategy for catechesis and evangelization.

**As a Mechanism for Catechesis & Evangelization**

As a mechanism for catechesis (religious instruction and faith formation) and evangelization (mission) are probably the two most critically important dimensions of the use of sport by youth & young adult ministers. Catechesis with youth & young adults can be informal and casual or, it can be intentional and systematic. Accordingly, sport becomes an excellent mechanism for catechesis with young people. Albeit catechesis is religious instruction and faith formation, it would be a mistake and error to restrict the ministry of catechesis to the classroom or to teach about Jesus in a purely academic fashion.[[45]](#endnote-45) Consequently, youth & young adult ministers would be wise to add sport to the overall curriculum as a catechetical tool to help increase relationships among peers, to promote initial conversion, and to foster personal and spiritual growth and development.[[46]](#endnote-46)

Pope Francis addresses the importance of sport in three places in his watershed document on youth & young adult ministry, *Christus Vivit* (*Christ is Alive!*). The first place he regards sport as a way to develop friendships and comradery in young people “Friendships can grow, where young men and women can meet one another, where they can share music, games, sports, but also reflection, and prayer.”[[47]](#endnote-47) He definitely sees sport and games as a vital part of ministry with young people. The second place that he discusses sport is concerning areas that need more growth and attention in youth & young adult ministry. Pope Francis states, “Equally significant is the emphasis that young people place on sports; the Church should *not* underestimate the potential of sports for education and formation, but instead maintain a strong presence there.”[[48]](#endnote-48) Pope Francis encourages youth and young adult ministers to include sports in their ministry curricula because it has evangelical and catechetical implications for ministry. Finally, his third reference to sport is relating sport to joy and pleasure. Pope Francis notes, “At the heart of the experience of sport is joy; the joy of exercising, of being together, of being alive and rejoicing in the gifts the Creator gives us each day.”[[49]](#endnote-49) Pope Francis clearly views sport as a joyful activity that young people should be taking part in and as a way of rejoicing in God’s gifts.

Ushering in the reign of God has always been the quintessential goal of Christianity and evangelization or mission has always been the central charge of the Church. As Presbyterian theologian Chap Clark proclaims, “Since its inception, youth ministry has evolved out of a *mission* conviction. . . regardless of denomination and tradition, mission is often cited as the basic reason for youth ministry.”[[50]](#endnote-50) Evangelization is a major component of youth & young adult ministry and sport is a good mechanism to support evangelism efforts.

When it comes to evangelizing young people, there are typically three components being utilized: “(1) *witnessing* or the simple living out of the faith, (2) *sharing* or the modest spreading of the faith, and (3) *outreach* or the activities and programming of the faith community.”[[51]](#endnote-51) When youth & young adult ministers are using sports to evangelize, it is *not* the conventional way of sharing the Gospel, but is a highly effective way of sharing Jesus with young people. Youth & young adult ministers can reach out to young people in a way that is fun and in an atmosphere that helps initial conversion and sustains faith.

Using sports in youth & young adult ministries as a method for faith formation and mission is a mechanism that has the potential to reach millions of young people. The methodology of using sports for witnessing, sharing, and outreach with young people is becoming more common that several Evangelical colleges and universities have made it a concentration of study within theology and/or Bible curricula.[[52]](#endnote-52)

**Parting Remarks**

As I finalize this article, I stop and look at my youth & young adult ministry bookshelves; five bookshelves, all full with youth & young adult ministry books, literally 100+ books on the subject, and *not* one of them deals specifically with sports in youth & young adult ministry. In fact, I cannot find one chapter dedicated to sports in any of the youth & young adult ministry books. How can this be? Games and sports are far too popular and consume lots of time each week in the lives of the majority of Americans. Utilizing play and sports in youth & young adult ministries is an untapped area that merits more attention.

In this article, I have provided a theology of sport as well as the positive impact that game and sports should ideally have on youth & young adult ministries. Hopefully, I have persuaded youth & young adult ministry scholars and youth & young adult ministers to begin to think of sport in a new light when it comes to growing youth & young adult disciples, cultivating a deeper spirituality, building a more dynamic community, and fostering relationships. Sports are here to stay and most young people either enjoy watching sports or playing sports. Ministry with young is ripe for programming sports directly into youth & young adult ministries curricula.

As the epigraph at the beginning of the article suggests, sports is one arena of our life; however, ministry is another arena of our life as well. Ministry to young people has the ability to connect, combine, and collaborate these two arenas of life together to create a rich Christian experience for young people who seek God. Youth & young adult ministries give sports a place to help meet a pastoral need of fun, play, and joy.

**End Notes**

1. David E. Prince, *In the Arena: The Promise of Sports for Christian Discipleship* (Nashville, TN: BH Publishing Group, 2016) 3-4. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Jeremy R. Treat, “More than a Game: A Theology of Sport,” *Themelios,* 40: 3 (2015), 1-12 (3). <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/more-than-a-game-theology-of-sport/> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Daniel A. Dombrowski, “What is Sport? What Should it Be?” In *Youth Sport & Spirituality: Catholic Perspectives,* edited by Patrick Kelly, 17-32. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015, 18. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Lincoln Harvey, *A Brief Theology of Sport* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), 62-63. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture.* Translated by R.F.C. Hull. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1955, 46. Originally published in Dutch in 1938. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Roger Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games.* Translated by Meyer Barash. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2001, 11-36. Originally published in French in 1961. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Dombrowski, 31. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Google Online Dictionary, <https://www.google.com/search?q=definition+of+sport>. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Robert Ellis, *The Games People Play: Theology, Religion, and Sport.* Eugene, OG; Wipf & Stock, 2014, 129. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
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11. Treat, 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
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