

Spirituality of Sports

Are you a sports fan or could you care less about whatever sport is in season? Maybe you become more than a little miffed when a sporting event takes priority over something else scheduled on that same day or time. These thoughts expressed in the description of tonight's service were thoughts I have increasingly had over the past few years. I hope I am not the only one, but if I am I would like to share with you some of my thoughts as I worked my way through this personal challenge to have a better understanding of those who love sports so much.

I had always noticed that church was often emptier on beautiful, sunny days. I remember an adult telling me when I was a teenager that rainy days were better for Episcopalians attendance at church. No golf that day, no catching up on yard work that didn't get done on Saturday, no excursions to the lake or the amusement park. As I grew older, I realized it wasn't just beautiful, sunny days. It was occurring if there was a sporting event on TV. I noticed that attendance at S.T.A.R. was less if a service happened to fall on the day for the Super Bowl, March Madness, or the Masters. In my own family, our daughter and son-in-law will not visit at Christmas because they can't ski here. I was becoming judgmental and resentful. These are feelings I have been challenged by often, because frankly, my shadow side is judgmental and resentful. Since I don't really like feeling that way, I needed to figure this out. How do I change my heart?

The best place to start, of course, was prayer! What I have come to discover is that when I pray I am transformed. So, I offered up my prayers to God and while I was waiting for an answer, I Googled! Googling "Spirituality of Sports" yielded lots of articles. But as I skimmed through them most of them dealt with the topic from the athlete's perspective or even through the eyes of the avid sports fan. I am not either one of those! Since googling didn't appear to be working for me, at least not yet, I relied on guidance through my prayers. Those answers to prayers seemed to be telling me to look back at the influences of sports, if any, in my own life. So here we go on a journey through my life as related to sports.

Growing up my parents were not sports fans, although I do remember my father rooting for the Philadelphia Phillies. I had no siblings so my experience with sports was limited to games with cousins at family picnics and schoolmates on the school playground. Never a fan of Dodge Ball folks. It seemed kind of mean to throw a ball at people. Later, in high school, I did enjoy going to football games every Friday night cheering on the Emmaus Green Hornets with friends and stands full of other fans. I have to admit, it was fun. And in the Spring, we did the same for the baseball team. I didn't go to college, so I never experienced that level of fandom that our son, daughter, and son-in-law felt for the University of Georgia. I suppose some of their enthusiasm has rubbed off on me, since I was kind of miffed when Georgia didn't get to play in the National Championship Game this year. Years later Don and I began dating. Don's family had not been big on sports while he was growing up either, so I didn't have to compete with sports on weekends. While dating and after we married, we went to a couple games from our high school, played some tennis, and mini-golfed.

Then we had children and everything changed! When they were old enough, we enrolled them in different sports programs, because, well, that's what everyone did, right? At age five our son played T-Ball and a fond memory for me was our mother-son T-Ball game with the Philly Phanatic as an honored guest. It was a big deal in Northampton, Pennsylvania that year. The game was broadcast on a radio show and everything. The boys won, but they did get to hit the ball off a T, after all! I took a Mommy and Me gymnastics class with our toddler daughter and we had lots of fun, tumbling, jumping on the trampoline, and using other gym equipment together. I was reminded of many fun times with my young children made possible by sports. The kids continued with various sports until our daughter at about age six decided she was more interested in art and then music. Our

son loved soccer and baseball and was pretty good at both! In soccer he made the “Traveling Team” which played on Sundays and I am embarrassed to say we missed church more than once in order to be at our scheduled game. Imagine that! Missing church for a sports event! At age ten or eleven, Brian was honored with receiving the Sportsmanship Award in his youth league at the end of the baseball season. Years later, he played on his high school soccer team for four years. I’m sorry to say they were a losing team, only winning a game or two a season. But they gave it their all and kept trying to get better year after year.

I never really followed any professional sports team. That, too changed in the 1990s when we lived in Georgia and the Atlanta Braves baseball team made their run from worst to first! A funny story...it was 1992 and the Braves were playing the Pittsburgh Pirates in the game that would win them the National League Championship. The bases were loaded with Sid Bream on first. Sid was rounding the bases and running from third to home plate. The throw to the home pulled the catcher toward first and by the time he got to the plate Sid slid under the tag and scored! Don, our son Brian, daughter Megan, our dogs Kelsey and Rex, and I were watching the game together. As the crowd began to cheer, we cheered along with them...Sid, Sid, Sid! Our dog Rex thought we were saying sit, sit, sit and he sat! We all laughed and then cheered as the Braves won and were headed to the World Series.

Now, why have I put you all through this trip down memory lane? To help illustrate what I learned through these memories. Things, that frankly, I had forgotten. I learned that connections are made through sports. I made connections with classmates, friends, and my own children. Our son, Brian, was one of those teenage boys who wasn’t interested in telling Mom about his day at school until we started watching the Braves games together. As we talked about the game other things started spilling out and that helped me connect with our teenage son. Playing team sports helps teach cooperation to achieve a common goal. It teaches sportsmanship, sometimes you win, sometimes you lose. The ritual of congratulating the opposing team at the end of a game reminds us of this. And it is certainly helpful to remember that it is important to lose, and win, graciously, in all of life. A lesson some people never seemed to have learned!

Although I am not a big sports fan, I saw something this week that really touched my heart. It was a news clip of after the Chiefs-Bills game. Losing the game to the Chiefs a Bills fan was heartbroken and in tears. I felt terrible for him, since the Bills have been so close to winning the AFC more than once recently.

In 2016 the Vatican launched an initiative titled “Sport at the Service of Humanity”, during which Pope Francis said: “Challenge yourself in faith as you challenge yourself in sports.” That conference identified six virtues that can be taught through sports: joy, compassion, respect, love, balance, and enlightenment. Although, this is directed toward the athlete, I think we can all benefit from those words. I know through this reflection I have recognized several of them in the memories of my own life and hope to remember them all going forward. No more judgment, no more resentment.

The Rev. Thomas Keating, a well-known Trappist order spiritual writer said, “Every human pleasure is meant to be a stepping-stone to knowing God better or to discovering some new aspect of God. Only when that stepping-stone becomes and end in itself – that is, when we over-identify with it –does it distort the divine intention. Everything in the universe is meant to be a reminder of God’s presence.

That includes Sports!