In die Skriflig / In Luce Verbi
ISSN: (Online) 2305-0853, (Print) 1018-6441

Christianity and sport

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Dates:
Received: 02 Sept. 2025
Accepted: 24 Oct. 2025
Published: 16 Jan. 2026

How to cite this article:
Olajide, M.D., 2026, 'Christianity and sport', *In die Skriflig* 60(1), a3252. https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v60i1.3252

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Sport has often been regarded as irrelevant to Christianity, and most scholarship has not given it sufficient attention. The objective of this study is to explore the nexus between religion and sport and to examine how both contribute to social cohesion and community development. This study employs literary analysis by examining and interpreting the Bible, and relevant secondary Christian literature by interrogating how Christianity relates to sport to construct a biblical worldview for Christian adherents. The findings reveal that sport has consistently served as a major social driving force from antiquity to the present. Both Christians and non-Christians, young and old alike, are drawn to sporting events. Sport transcends social, cultural, political, economic, and even religious boundaries. Consequently, Christian communities should recognise and harness the opportunities latent in sport for fostering community cohesion, development, evangelism, and holistic renewal.

Contribution: The challenge for Christians is not to withdraw from sport but to engage with it wisely, using it as a space for virtue, witness, and celebration. The adventure of sport is not merely about completing races or winning trophies – it is about enduring with faith and focusing on the everlasting crown that will never fade (1 Pt 5:4).

Keywords: Christianity; communities; ethics; sports; spiritual.

Introduction

The convergence of Christianity and athletics presents a compelling discourse within the history of culture and religion. Both function as influential social forces that profoundly shape values, identities, and communities.

Sport, as a global human endeavour, transcends language, culture, and geography, uniting individuals through shared experiences of competition, recreation, and celebration. Conversely, Christianity – the largest religion in the world – addresses humanity's deepest spiritual aspirations, offering a framework for meaning, morality, and hope. When these two spheres intersect, a critical question emerges: How should Christians perceive and engage with sport? Should sport be seen as a divine gift that fosters physical expression and communal harmony, or should it be viewed with caution as a potential distraction that diverts attention from God? This tension has existed throughout Christian history and continues to provoke debate within contemporary society.

Christianity embraces a holistic vision of human life that includes both spiritual and physical dimensions. The biblical perspective of the body as God's creation stands in stark contrast to philosophical traditions that regard the body as inferior to the soul. The Apostle Paul affirms in 1 Corinthians 6:19–20 that the body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, thereby emphasising the dignity of embodied existence. This assertion suggests that bodily activities, including sport, can serve as a means of glorifying God when pursued with appropriate intention and discipline.

Moreover, Paul frequently employs athletic metaphors – running the race, fighting the good fight, exercising self-discipline – indicating that sport offers a rich symbolic framework for understanding spiritual truths. Therefore, the Christian tradition cannot dismiss sport as secular or insignificant; rather, it must recognise its rightful place within a faithful Christian life.

In contemporary society, sport presents both opportunities and challenges for Christian engagement. On the one hand, it provides a significant means of fostering community, promoting health, and modelling Christian virtues such as fairness, teamwork, and perseverance. Athletes like Eric Liddell, who famously testified that he sensed God's pleasure while running, exemplify how sport may be integrated into a Christian understanding of vocation (Hamilton 2016:90). Conversely, the global sports industry is laden with concerns: commercial exploitation, the use of

performance-enhancing substances, the idolisation of athletes, and an excessive emphasis on winning. These issues generate moral dilemmas for Christians seeking to participate faithfully in the world of sport without compromising their convictions.

This article seeks to examine the relationship between Christianity and sport in a detailed manner. It begins by tracing the historical development of Christian attitudes toward sport, from the early church's suspicion to the enthusiasm associated with the Muscular Christianity movement. Next, it considers theological principles, exploring key biblical and doctrinal insights that influence Christian engagement with sport. Subsequently, the study investigates how sport may function as a medium for moral and spiritual formation, while also addressing the challenges posed by its commercialisation and the risk of idolatry. Finally, the article reflects on the practical implications for the contemporary church, highlighting how Christians today can actively participate in and utilise sport for the glory of God.

Historical perspective on Christianity and sport

The narrative surrounding Christianity's relationship with sport is long and intriguingly complex, shaped by cultural developments, theological debates, and the evolving nature of human societies. To truly understand contemporary Christian engagement with athletics, it is essential to reflect on the earliest encounters between the church and sport, beginning in the Greco-Roman era, where athletics flourished, particularly through the Olympic Games. These competitions, held every 4 years in honour of Zeus, were far more than simple athletic contests; they were religious ceremonies deeply embedded within the fabric of pagan worship (Golden 1998:45). Victors were celebrated almost as demigods – their physiques admired, their names immortalised, and their achievements commemorated in rituals that exalted human accomplishment as though it bore divine sanction. For many early Christians, such practices represented not harmless entertainment, but a worldview fundamentally opposed to the worship of the one true God.

Early church leaders expressed their concerns with remarkable clarity regarding the spiritual dangers they perceived in sport. Tertullian, writing in the 2nd century, vehemently condemned the spectacles of his day, arguing that they arose from idolatry and were fuelled by passions that distracted believers from their devotion to Christ (Tertullian 1931:5). For him, the arena was no place for Christians: participation – whether through cheering for bloodshed or idolising athletes – amounted to complicity in the very culture that had condemned Christ to death.

Augustine of Hippo echoed this apprehension. In his *Confessions*, he recounts the story of a young man named Alypius, who became captivated by the violent spectacle of gladiatorial combat. Although initially resistant, once he witnessed the bloodshed, Alypius was consumed by its excitement. Augustine (1991:6.8) employs this narrative as a cautionary example of how entertainment rooted in violence corrupts the soul and turns the heart away from God. Similarly, many early Christians perceived events such as the Olympic Games and comparable contests as interconnected with pagan worship and moral decline. The body might have been strengthened through athletic competition, but the spirit was jeopardised.

Yet Christian history is seldom one-dimensional. Even in these formative centuries, Christians did not reject athletic imagery outright. The Apostle Paul himself – despite his critique of certain secular pursuits – frequently relied on athletic metaphors to illustrate the Christian life. When he spoke of 'running the race' to earn an imperishable crown (1 Cor 9:24–25), or of 'fighting the good fight' and finishing the race (Tm 2 4:7), Paul drew directly from the imagery of the Olympic arena. His use of these metaphors illustrates that, although Christians denounced the idolatry and brutality associated with the games, they simultaneously recognised in athletics a model of discipline, endurance, and striving for a higher goal. This dual posture – condemnation on the one hand and appropriation on the other – established the foundation for the church's intricate relationship with sport throughout history.

As Christianity spread and eventually became the dominant religion in Europe following Constantine's conversion, the scepticism toward sport gradually softened, although it did not disappear entirely. Connections to pagan religions gradually diminished, yet physical activity remained intertwined with discussions of ethics and self-discipline. In monastic settings, for instance, the focus was on physical mastery as an integral aspect of spiritual commitment. Engaging in physical labour, farming, and even basic forms of exercise were not regarded as 'sport' in the modern sense, but they nevertheless reflected the conviction that bodily upkeep was essential to Christian discipline. Likewise, the culture surrounding knights and medieval tournaments demonstrated how athletic contests could be legitimised when understood as preparation for societal protection, even though such activities were frequently criticised by church authorities for their excesses and vanity.

The human body was no longer disregarded, yet its role was carefully regulated considering spiritual priorities.

The Protestant Reformation in the 16th century added further complexity to this narrative. Reformers such as Martin Luther and John Calvin asserted that all aspects of life, including the body and leisure pursuits, should be lived in devotion to God. Luther, who enjoyed bowling, argued that recreation could revitalise both body and mind for God's service. Nonetheless, this affirmation coexisted with the concerns of Puritan traditions, especially in England and later in America, which regarded many sports with suspicion.

Activities like Sabbath-breaking, gambling, drunkenness, and acts of cruelty frequently accompanied pastimes such as cockfighting or bear-baiting, prompting Puritans to denounce them as diversions from true piety.

Despite this, even the Puritans permitted certain 'lawful recreations', such as archery or running, on the grounds that they promoted health or fulfilled civic responsibilities (Collinson 1989:188). The legacy of the Reformation was therefore complex: it affirmed the body as part of God's creation while drawing clear distinctions between acceptable and sinful forms of sporting activities.

By the 19th century, a significant shift occurred with the rise of what came to be known as Muscular Christianity. In Victorian England, the forces of industrialisation and urbanisation gave rise to fresh anxieties about the deterioration of male physical vigour and the perceived decline of moral character (Ladd & Mathisen 1999:18).

Authors such as Charles Kingsley and Thomas Hughes began promoting the view that vigorous physical activity, particularly organised sport, was not merely acceptable but essential for expressing Christian manhood.

This movement argued that sports such as cricket, rugby, and rowing cultivated virtues like courage, perseverance, teamwork, and fair play – qualities closely aligned with Christian discipleship. Its influence spread rapidly, shaping schools, churches, and eventually missionary initiatives abroad.

As the British Empire expanded, missionaries carried with them not only the gospel but also footballs, cricket bats, and the ideals of Muscular Christianity. Across Africa, Asia, and the Americas, sport was introduced alongside Christian teaching, frequently aimed at nurturing both physical and spiritual development. The YMCA, founded in 1844, played a pivotal role in this regard, promoting the development of 'body, mind, and spirit'. Its motto captured a holistic vision of human flourishing rooted in Christian values, and its sporting programmes became models for similar ministries worldwide.

A review of this extensive history reveals a complex narrative of negotiation between faith and culture, rather than a straightforward story of opposition or acceptance. The early church denounced sport for its associations with paganism and violence yet drew freely on athletic imagery to illuminate the Christian journey. The medieval church engaged with the body through monastic and knightly practices, affirming its role in divine service. The Reformation embraced bodily recreation while imposing certain limitations on its execution. The 19th century embraced sport with renewed enthusiasm, understanding it as a means for character formation and evangelism. The 20th century continued along this trajectory, recognising sport both as a mission field and as a legitimate subject for theological reflection.

This historical overview demonstrates that Christianity has never regarded sport as trivial. Rather, the church has consistently wrestled with its meaning and role within human existence. The enduring challenge, past and present, has been to recognise the positive dimensions of physical activity and competition while guarding against the pitfalls of idolatry, pride, and violence. As contemporary society elevates sport to unprecedented levels of cultural importance – seen in the billions who watch events such as the Olympic Games or the World Cup – Christians are reminded that sport transcends mere play. It is a potent cultural force, capable of shaping hearts and communities, and therefore demands sustained theological reflection.

Theological reflection on sport

Sport may appear at first glance to occupy a mundane sphere of life, yet upon closer reflection they reveal profound theological questions. What compels human beings, throughout cultures and across history, to invent games, chase balls, compete in races, and cheer themselves hoarse in support of their teams? Why do victories evoke tears of joy, while defeats feel like deep sorrow? And how might all of this relate to the divine?

Christian faith has consistently affirmed the inherent goodness of creation. 'God saw everything that he had made, and it was very good' (Gn 1:31). This affirmation extends to the human body. Unlike ideologies that treat the body as a temporary vessel for the spirit, Christianity emphasises that the body is integral to human identity. We are not merely souls housed in flesh; we are embodied beings created in God's likeness. Accordingly, sport becomes a means of honouring physical existence. To run, stretch, leap, and strive is to engage the body's capacities and limitations, recognising both as divine gifts. A sprinter in motion or a gymnast suspended in the air is not merely performing an athletic feat but manifesting the creativity and artistry of God's design.

However, theological perspectives also acknowledge that creation is marked by brokenness. The joy of play can readily devolve into pride, violence, and idolatry. From the earliest centuries, Christians recognised how swiftly sport could become an arena of self-exaltation or a distraction from devotion to God. In the contemporary world, sport is increasingly shadowed by controversies such as doping, cheating, exploitation of athletes, and an excessive fixation on winning. Under such conditions, sport ceases to be an arena of grace and becomes one of despair. Therefore, the theological task is to discern when play remains play – and when it becomes harmful.

Sport also extends beyond the individual to the wider community. Few activities draw people together across linguistic, socio-economic, and cultural boundaries as powerfully as a shared game. Entire nations pause to observe the Olympic Games, neighbours gather for local football matches, and strangers embrace when their team scores. Theologically, this reflects the truth that human beings are

created for fellowship. Sport illustrates that joy is intensified when experienced communally (Hoffman 2010:58). At its best, it encourages unity, respect, and even healing. The handshake after a tense match, the embrace between rivals, or the collective silence of a stadium honouring a fallen athlete all echo the biblical mandate to love one's neighbour.

The idea of discipline provides yet another point of convergence between sport and theology (Ellis 2014:45). Paul's references to running a race and 'engaging in the good fight' (1 Cor 9:24-27; 2 Tm 4:7) indicate that he regarded athletics as an illuminating metaphor for discipleship. Training an athlete's body requires sacrifice, perseverance, and self-control – qualities that equally define a committed Christian life The athlete rises early, resists indulgence, and endures fatigue not for immediate comfort but for the sake of a greater reward. In Paul's imagery, that reward symbolises the imperishable prize of God's kingdom. Thus, the discipline cultivated through sport can become a training ground for the soul.

Psychologically, further parallels emerge between sport and Christianity. Firstly, participants in both domains express heightened levels of emotion, including elevated serotonin and adrenaline. Secondly, both sport and faith emphasise unity and cooperation. Thirdly, both Christianity and sport uphold ethical standards, requiring participants to adhere to the frameworks that govern each sphere. Yet, a key divergence between Christianity and sport remains: the rewards in sport are temporary, while in Christianity it is oriented towards eternity. In the life of faith, rewards are conferred on the participant in the eschaton, at the judgement seat of Christ (2 Cor 5:10; Rm 14:10).

Perhaps the most profound theological insight into sport emerges in the notion of *play*. Play is not necessary for survival. We do not play to obtain food or shelter; we play because it brings delight. In this sense, play becomes a foretaste of eternity.

Sport as a moral and spiritual formation tool

The connection between Christianity and athletics extends beyond mere virtues, entertainment, or physical activity; it reaches into the core of human formation. Sport possesses the capacity to shape character, cultivate virtues, and deepen spiritual awareness in ways that sermons and teachings alone may not accomplish. Viewed through a Christian perspective, sport is transformed from a competitive arena into a space for discipleship. In this sense, athletics may be understood as a means of moral and spiritual formation, shaping individuals in habits and dispositions consistent with the Christian way of life.

At the core of athletic practise lies the concept of discipline. Every competitor recognises that success on the field demands commitment of it: early mornings, careful nutrition, intensive training, and a willingness to forgo comfort for personal growth. This mirrors the Christian call to discipleship. Just as an athlete trains the body in pursuit of excellence, so the believer cultivates the spirit in the pursuit of holiness. The Apostle Paul articulates this connection clearly: 'Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we, an imperishable' (1 Cor 9:25 [ESV]). Paul's analogy suggests that athletics is not merely recreational; it provides a concrete expression of the perseverance required in faith. Self-discipline, endurance, and resilience cultivated through sport may thus serve as symbols of spiritual virtues.

Sport further offers a distinctive context in which humility may be formed Victory can tempt athletes towards arrogance, while defeat often exposes character. To win with grace is to recognise the contributions of teammates, coaches, and even opponents. To lose with dignity is to resist despair, bitterness, and self-pity. In both cases, sport teaches that success and failure are never solely individual achievements. For Christians, this resonates with the call to humility in Philippians 2:3–4, which urges believers to 'consider others more significant than yourselves'. Thus, a simple handshake at the close of a football match may acquire profound theological significance, embodying a spirit of respect, humility, and communal responsibility.

Furthermore, team sports foster the virtues of cooperation and camaraderie. Regardless of how gifted an individual athlete may be, team success depends on communication, collaboration, and self-sacrifice. Players must often subordinate personal ambition for the benefit of the group. This mirrors the Christian understanding of the church as the 'body of Christ', where each person contributes unique talents to the overall flourishing of the community (1 Cor 12:12–27). A defender assisting a striker or a point guard prioritising a pass over a shot exemplifies, in athletic terms, the Christian ethic of serving one another in love. Consequently, the sports field thus becomes a space not merely for skill acquisition but for living out selflessness.

Beyond these virtues, sport also confronts fundamental ethical questions. Athletes often confront decisions that test their integrity: whether to compete honestly or cheat, whether to retaliate when provoked, or whether to respect the rules when unsupervised. Each decision forms part of a gradual process of character development. Christian ethics emphasise honesty as a reflection of God's purity, and sport provides countless opportunities to practise such integrity. To choose fairness even at the cost of victory becomes a lived expression of faithfulness.

Sport also builds resilience in the face of adversity. Injuries, defeats, and obstacles are inevitable aspects of athletic involvement. These hardships test not only physical endurance but also spiritual maturity. For Christians, suffering holds significance and is integrally linked to growth in virtue (Rm 5:3–4). In this sense, an athlete who endures injury with hope exemplifies the biblical principle that trials may produce endurance and character. The resilience

nurtured in sport, can therefore equip believers to confront disappointments with steadfast faith.

Perhaps most profoundly, sport promotes joy – a joy that reflects the goodness of creation. Activities such as running, jumping, competing, and playing remind us that the body is not an adversary of the spirit but rather a divine gift. The delight experienced in play may be regarded as a form of praise, an expression of gratitude for the gift of existence. Theologian Moltmann (1972) suggests that play reflects the freedom of God's children, liberated from the constraints of pure utility and labour. In this sense, when Christians engage in sport with joy, they participate in a rhythm of life that echoes the divine invitation to Sabbath rest and celebration (Moltmann 1972:15).

Nonetheless, employing sport as a means of moral and spiritual development requires careful consideration. Although sport can foster virtues, it can equally cultivate vices such as pride, aggression, and idolatry. The challenge lies in ensuring that sport remains oriented towards God rather than becoming a substitute for him. When approached with gratitude, humility, and love, sport can indeed serve as a powerful instrument for shaping Christian discipleship.

Challenges of integrating Christianity and sport

Beyond the cultivation of moral virtues, sport also confront the internal battleground of ethics. Competitors frequently encounter choices that test their honesty: whether to compete fairly or resort to deceit, whether to retaliate after a foul, or whether to obey the rules even when unsupervised. Each decision constitutes a moral act, gradually shaping the athlete's character. Christian ethics uphold integrity as a reflection of God's holiness, and the sporting arena offers countless opportunities to embody this integrity (Brock 2010:39–52). Choosing honesty in competition – even when it results in defeat – becomes a visible expression of faithfulness.

Simultaneously, sport builds resilience in the face of adversity (Novak 1994:112). Injuries, defeats, and obstacles are inevitable aspects of athletic participation. Such challenges test not only physical endurance but also spiritual growth. From a Christian perspective, suffering possesses significance and is intrinsically linked to the process of spiritual growth (Rm 5:3–4). Thus, the athlete who confronts injury with hope exemplifies the biblical truth that hardship can cultivate perseverance and character. The resilience fostered through sport is transferable to wider life challenges, equipping believers to face disappointment and trial with steadfast faith.

Perhaps most significantly, sport promotes joy – an embodied joy that reflects the goodness inherent in creation. Activities such as running, jumping, competing, and playing remind us that the body is not the adversary of the spirit but rather a divine gift. The pleasure found in play may be regarded as a form of worship: a spontaneous expression of gratitude for existence itself.

Nonetheless, for a Christian to employ sport as a vehicle for moral and spiritual development presents considerable challenges. These difficulties arise from the conflicting values, motivations, and cultural influences surrounding sport. Believers who participate in or engage with sporting culture often find themselves navigating the tension between the call to discipleship and the pressures of performance, competition, and acclaim.

A central challenge is the danger of idolatry. Given its global appeal, sport can easily transcend mere recreation and become a faith itself. Stadiums can resemble places of worship; athletes are venerated as cultural saints; trophies and medals become objects of reverence. For many, Sundays shift from being occasions of congregational worship to opportunities for following sporting fixtures. Such a shift reveals the subtle risk of sport displacing God. As theologian Harvey (2014) observes, the intense passion that renders sport so enthralling can also foster a spirituality devoid of God. For Christians, the danger lies in confusing devotion to sport with devotion to Christ (Harvey 2014:56).

Another challenge concerns the tension between Christian values and the ethos of sport. Fundamentally, Christianity emphasises humility, service, and love for others, whereas the sporting culture often elevates pride, personal achievement, and dominance over opponents. The rhetoric of winning at all costs, defeating opponents, and celebrating individual success, clash sharply with Christ's command to love one's neighbour, and even one's enemy (Mt 5:44). Athletes striving for success may feel tempted to compromise Christian principles in the pursuit of victory.

Additionally, the prevalence of violence and aggression within certain sports poses a moral difficulty. Some sports are predicated upon physical confrontation, where injury and aggressive behaviour are not merely common but often glorified. While discipline and resilience remain commendable qualities, the celebration of violence conflicts with the Christian principle of peace (Parry 2007:63). Both Christian athletes and spectators must wrestle with the question of whether their enjoyment of such aggression diminishes their representation of Christ, who calls his followers to be peacemakers.

Finally, the clash between sporting schedules and worship gatherings presents a practical yet significant concern. Sunday – the traditional day for communal worship and Sabbath rest – is increasingly dominated by major sporting events and youth leagues. For numerous Christian families, this raises a difficult question: Should they prioritise Sunday worship or support their child's soccer game? The cultural expectation to place sport above spiritual practice can undermine the rhythms of Christian community life.

Practical implications for contemporary Christianity

The relationship between Christianity and sport is not merely an intellectual concern but a practical one that influences daily life in churches, educational institutions, families, and communities. As sport have emerged as a global cultural phenomenon, the church must recognise its formative power. The central question is not whether Christians should engage in sports, but how they may do so in ways that reflect the principles of the gospel rather than the idols often associated with sporting culture.

A significant implication of this recognition is the need for intentional discipleship within sporting environments. Christian athletes, coaches, and supporters must be equipped to evaluate critically the values embedded within sport. Just as the early church instructed believers on how to live faithfully within the Roman Empire, so today's church must prepare Christians to navigate the world of sport with discernment. This includes teaching on themes such as humility in victory, grace in defeat, resistance to idolatry, and upholding integrity in competition. Without deliberate discipleship, Christians risk absorbing the prevailing culture of sport rather than transforming it.

Another significant dimension is the potential for outreach and evangelism through sport. Athletics naturally dismantle cultural, ethnic, and social barriers, opening opportunities for relationship-building and witness. Christian organisations worldwide have employed sport as a means of outreach, ranging from local football leagues to international competitions. The church can therefore regard sport not merely as recreation but as a mission field in which the love of Christ can be expressed through cooperation, hospitality, and community involvement. However, evangelism through sport must avoid manipulation; sport should not be used simply as a lure to attract participants, but rather as a genuine context in which the gospel may be embodied and shared (Brock 2010:39–52).

The integration of Christianity and sport also shapes community dynamics and inclusivity. In many urban and rural settings, sports facilities function as communal hubs where individuals gain a sense of belonging and identity. Churches that engage with sport can extend their presence beyond the sanctuary into the rhythms of everyday life (Higgs & Braswell 2004:134). By organising sports programmes, partnering with local leagues, or providing recreational activities, churches can build relationships with youth who might never attend traditional services. In this way, sport becomes a means of embodying the incarnational essence of the gospel, reaching individuals in their own environments.

The relationship between Christianity and sport is not merely an academic discussion but a practical concern that affects everyday life in churches, schools, families, and communities. As sport has become a global cultural phenomenon, the church must acknowledge its influence. Therefore, the critical question is not whether Christians should participate in sport, but how they may do so in ways that reflect gospel principles rather than the idols so prominent in the contemporary sporting culture.

A key implication of this is the need for intentional discipleship within athletic contexts. Christian athletes, coaches, and supporters must be equipped to thoughtfully evaluate the values embedded within sport (Ellis 2014). Just as the early church instructed believers on how to live faithfully within the Roman Empire, today's church must prepare Christians to navigate the world of sport with discernment. This includes cultivating humility in victory, grace in defeat, resistance to idolatry, and maintaining integrity in moments of pressure. Without such discipleship, Christians risk adopting the prevailing culture of sport rather than transforming it.

Another important dimension is the potential for outreach and evangelism through sport. Athletic activity naturally breaks down cultural, ethnic, and social barriers, creating opportunities for authentic connection and witness. Christian organisations across the globe have employed sport as a means of outreach, ranging from local football leagues to international events. The church can therefore regard sport not simply as a recreation but as a mission field where the love of Christ may be demonstrated through cooperation, hospitality, and community engagement. However, evangelism within sport must avoid any form of coercion; sport must not become a mere lure to attract individuals, but rather a genuine context in which the gospel is embodied lived out.

The intersection of Christianity and sport also influences community dynamics and inclusivity. In numerous urban and rural settings, sports facilities function as community hubs where individuals find belongings and identity. Churches that engage in sport can extend their ministry beyond the walls of the sanctuary and into the rhythms of daily life. By hosting sporting activities, partnering with local leagues, or providing recreational opportunities, churches can build relationships with young people who may not feel drawn to traditional forms of worship. In this manner, sport become an avenue for expressing the incarnational nature of the gospel – reaching people in their own environments.

Conclusion

The relationship between Christianity and athletics is both beautiful and complex. At its heart, sport embodies qualities that Christians have long valued: dedication, determination, collaboration, and joy. It provides a context in which virtues such as humility in defeat and gratitude in success can be

cultivated and displayed. It is therefore unsurprising that Paul and other biblical authors drew on athletic imagery to depict the Christian journey of faith. Running a race, fighting the good fight, and pressing on toward the prize remain powerful metaphors for discipleship. When understood as a gift, sport can nurture not only the physical body but also the spiritual life.

However, this gift is accompanied by significant challenges. Contemporary society often tends to elevate to idolatrous dimensions, with stadiums functioning as secular sanctuaries and athletes treated as cultural icons. The relentless pursuit of victory – sometimes at any cost – can encourage cheating or exploitation, all of which undermine the true essence of play. Such realities remind Christians that although sport can elevate human experience, it can also divert our attention from it. For Christians, discernment is therefore essential: recognising when sport enriches spiritual life and when it threatens to overshadow one's ultimate allegiance to God. As Volf (1996) observes, any cultural practice has the capacity either to 'echo' God's intentions or to 'distort' them, depending on how believers inhabit and use it.

Despite these challenges, sport remains an important sphere for mission and spiritual growth. In practical terms, Christians are called to embody integrity within athletic environments, demonstrating that how a game is played, holds greater significance than the outcome itself. Churches, likewise, can view sport as a valuable avenue for fellowship and outreach. Recreational programmes, youth leagues, and informal games create opportunities for relationships that transcend barriers of class, ethnicity, and belief. In communities marked by conflict or inequality, a soccer field or basketball court may become an unexpected space for reconciliation. In this sense, sport have the potential to manifest the gospel's message of unity and peace. A poignant historical example illustrating the intersection between Christianity and sport is the 1914 Christmas Truce during the First World War, when opposing armies observed an unofficial ceasefire. Soldiers voluntarily laid down their weapons on Christmas Eve, sang carols, exchanged gifts, held burial services, and ultimately played a football match together (Ray 2025).

In conclusion, the relationship between Christianity and sport is dynamic and requires thoughtful engagement. Sport is neither inherently sacred nor unholy; rather, it becomes what individuals and communities make of it. When pursued as a joyful offering before God – marked by gratitude, integrity, and communal fellowship – it directs attention beyond itself to the deeper joy found in Christ. Conversely, when elevated to the level of idolatry, sport risks distorting affections and displacing God from the centre of one's life. The task for Christians is therefore not to withdraw from sport but to participate in it wisely, employing it as a realm for virtue, witness, and celebration. Ultimately, the journey is not merely about completing races or securing trophies; it is about enduring in faith and focusing on the everlasting crown of glory (1 Pt 5:4).

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that no financial or personal relationships inappropriately influenced the writing of this article.

Author's contribution

Michael D. Olajide is the sole author of this research article. The author confirms that this work is entirely their own, has reviewed the article, approved the final version for submission and publication, and takes full responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

The author confirms that the data supporting this study and its findings are available within the article and its listed references.

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