

GAME DAY FOR THE GLORY OF GOD



A Guide for Athletes, Fans, & Wannabes

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Game Day for the Glory of God

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THE JOY OF SPORTS



Running is a painful thing for me. My chest hurts. My feet ache. The muscles in my legs tighten up. By the end of the run I usually have two main concerns: either my heart is beating with such intensity that I'm concerned it might burst and I will die, or I cannot fill my lungs with enough oxygen to keep me from passing out and/or dying. But there is also something very pleasurable about running. Running brings a sense of freedom, as if I'm throwing off restraints. As I feel the wind blowing against me and see the pavement gliding beneath me, I begin to experience pleasure along with the pain. Eric Liddell would have understood. Eric was a runner, a blazing fast runner, and he knew that it was God who made him fast. For Eric, running wasn't about getting in shape or losing weight. It was all about pleasure. In the classic movie *Chariots of Fire*, Eric makes the following profound statement:

I believe God made me for a purpose, but he also made me fast. And when I run I feel His pleasure.¹

When Eric ran, he sensed God's pleasure! Speed was God's gift to Eric, and Eric took immense pleasure in that gift. He viewed his speed as a gift from God to be thoroughly enjoyed. Have you ever experienced that wonderful sense of pleasure of which Eric spoke?

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Have you ever had that feeling of glory, of being incredibly alive, that comes from playing sports? When all your muscles are working together and your heart is pounding like a hot rod engine and every sense is sharpened? It's a glorious thing. Sports are clearly gifts from God to us.

But why is it that we feel such joy in sports? What is it that brings us to our feet when we see a basketball player soar through the air for a rim-rocking dunk? What is it that makes us smile when we smash a golf ball down the fairway? Why is there such pleasure in playing touch football in a muddy backyard with our friends? Throughout this chapter we'll consider these questions so that we might enjoy the gift of sports in ways that please and honor God.

THE JOY OF EXCELLENCE

There is something in us that is irresistibly drawn toward excellence. We can't help but gaze in wonder at a masterful piece of artwork. Our hearts are captivated by the glorious strains of music created by a symphony. A thanksgiving turkey roasted to golden-brown perfection receives our emphatic praise. Everywhere you look people and companies are engaged in the passionate pursuit of excellence, and nowhere is this more clearly displayed than in the arena of sports. Every player is in search of the "perfect swing" or the "perfect shot" or even the "perfect season." Day in and day out players push their bodies to the limit in an effort to sharpen their athletic skills. Some coaches have taken the pursuit of excellence to the extreme, cursing and screaming at their players over even the smallest mistakes. As spectators we are also enraptured by excellence. We can't help but be dazzled as we watch an Olympic sprinter run a blazing 100 meters in under ten seconds or see Chicago Bulls guard Ben Gordon knock down nine consecutive

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three-point shots. There is something awe-inspiring about watching St. Louis Cardinals first baseman Albert Pujols swat mammoth home runs or seeing Tiger Woods absolutely murder a golf ball. Excellence is attractive.

Why are we so drawn to excellence? At first glance this might seem like an odd question. Why would we not be drawn to excellence? It's almost like asking why a man would be attracted to a woman. It's just the way it is. Or is it? I believe that the answer is not as simple as we might think. It goes much deeper and is rooted in the very character of God.

God is the most excellent, glorious being who exists. In Matthew 5:48 Jesus tells us, "Your heavenly Father is perfect." Stop and ponder that word "perfect" for a moment. God is perfection. His love is the sweetest and most tender love that has ever been known. It is perfect love. His power is both awe-inspiring and terrifying. It is perfect power. His wisdom, which infinitely exceeds all the wisdom collected by men through the ages, is perfect wisdom. He is perfect in every facet of his character, and all that he does flows out of his excellence.

All of creation has been kissed by the glory of God and gives us a small glimpse into his character. Even though creation has been marred and distorted by sin, we can still see the glory of God piercing through. When we hear a bird lifting its voice in beautiful song or see a breathtaking sunrise, we are glimpsing the character of God. He created the singing bird and the golden hues of a sunrise. If we get such pleasure from these things, what must the God who created them be like? He must be the most excellent of all! The glories of creation are meant to direct our attention to the glorious Creator. C. S. Lewis put it this way:

I was standing today in the dark toolshed. The sun was shining outside and through the crack at the top of the door there

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came a sunbeam. From where I stood that beam of light, with the specks of dust floating in it, was the most striking thing in the place. Everything else was almost pitch-black. I was seeing the beam, not seeing things by it. Then I moved so that the beam fell on my eyes. Instantly the whole previous picture vanished. I saw no toolshed, and (above all) no beam. Instead I saw, framed in the irregular cranny at the top of the door, green leaves moving on the branches of a tree outside and beyond that, 90 odd million miles away, the sun. Looking along the beam, and looking at the beam are very different experiences.²

Lewis understood that we must look through the “beam” of God’s good gifts to see their glorious source. We see this again in James 1:17, which reads, “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.” Behind every good gift in creation is a generous and glorious God.

This applies to sports as well. Professional baseball players are incredible. It amazes me to see a person hurl a ball at ninety miles an hour with sniper-like accuracy. I can’t throw a baseball that hard. My arm would fall off if I tried. My flimsy arm simply lacks the power. The arm of a Major League pitcher is like a stick of dynamite—absolutely packed with power. Now consider God himself. If God has given such power to frail human beings, how much more powerful must he be? A Major League pitcher is throwing a small, white sphere that weighs a mere five ounces. God threw the planets into orbit. Even the best pitchers lack the ability to control their pitches at times. God holds the universe together and keeps the planets in orbit. Humans have some power. God is infinitely powerful.

I’m even more amazed by professional golfers. My body refuses to play golf. When I pick up a golf club, I lose all control

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of my hands and arms. I look like I'm having a mild seizure when I swing the club. When I hit the ball, there's no guarantee that it will go straight, or even forward. Watching Tiger Woods play golf is a different story. He has mastered his body, and it does his bidding. His swing is ferocious, his putts delicate. He makes his opponents look like putt-putt golfers. The excellence of Tiger, however, is but the faintest whisper of God's excellence. Tiger Woods makes mistakes. He slices balls into the trees and misses easy putts. He occasionally chokes in the clutch. But God never makes mistakes, and he does all things with excellence! I experience joy in watching Tiger Woods because I'm catching a very faint glimpse of the glory and excellence of God.

This should greatly affect the way we play and watch sports. When we excel at sports, we are in a very small way reflecting the excellence of God's character. This is part of the reason why we experience so much joy in playing sports. Doing things excellently is a reflection of God, who does all things with excellence. The same is true of watching sports. When we see an athlete perform exceptionally well, we're seeing a small portion of God's character.

For example, in the 1982 NFC Championship game, Joe Montana and Dwight Clark connected for what has since become known simply as "The Catch." With less than a minute remaining in the game and the Forty-Niners trailing 27-21, Montana lined up on the Cowboys' six-yard line. As soon as the ball was snapped, Montana was under pressure. The Forty-Niners' front line collapsed, and Montana found himself face to face with three Cowboy defenders. He rolled to his right, under hot pursuit from the defense, desperately looking for an open receiver. At the last possible second Montana floated a pass to the back right corner of the end zone in the general direction of Forty-Niners receiver Dwight Clark. Clark launched himself into the air and managed

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to snag the pass with his outstretched fingertips, winning the NFC championship for the Forty-Niners and securing for himself a place in football lore.³ Clark's catch was a thing of beauty and was a reflection of the excellence of God.

The application of this truth is simple. When you play sports well, turn your heart to God and praise him for his excellence. Acknowledge that he's the only one who does all things well. Acknowledge that your ability to do things with excellence is nothing compared to his ability to do things with excellence. Respond by thanking him for the abilities that he's given to you and remembering that all talent comes from him. Similarly, when you're watching sports and see an athlete make a play that brings your hands up and your jaw down, let that direct your thoughts to God. Take a moment to praise him for the gifts that he's given to men, and praise him for his superior excellence. For those of you who play organized sports, let this motivate you to practice hard. We can glorify God through the pursuit of excellence, and excellence only comes through hard work. God isn't glorified by halfhearted, mediocre efforts. So work hard in practice, not for your own honor and praise, but for the glory of God.

THE JOY OF VICTORY

Why is it that we love victory? Why is it that within minutes of sitting down to watch a game, I find myself instinctively rooting for one team over another, even if I have no connection to either team? What is it that drives men and women to sacrifice their time, energy, friends, family, social life, and even spiritual life in the pursuit of victory? Why do we take our passion to win into the smallest and most insignificant portions of our lives? We play Monopoly as if it were the Super Bowl and play Life as if it really were life. We love to win.

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Unfortunately, our passion for victory is not pure in any sense. We are arrogant and proud and often desire victory solely for the praise it will bring us. Losers have never been admired throughout history, and we certainly don't want to be lumped in with those chumps. But does this mean that it's wrong to desire victory at all? Should we desire to lose? I don't believe so. In victory we see a snapshot of the nature and character of God.

We live in a world that's opposed to God. Like a great plague, sin has ravaged all of creation. Scripture tells us that those who don't know Christ are enemies of God and hostile toward him. Satan prowls about like a rabid lion, seeking to oppose all that God does and to destroy the faith of Christians. Suffering permeates all of life, and tragedies are a regular occurrence. It would seem that evil is winning all the battles.

But Scripture paints a very different picture for us. It acknowledges that evil has filled the earth, but it doesn't stop there. It tells us about a God who is always the victor and conqueror. His plans can't be thwarted, and he always triumphs over his enemies. In Psalm 110:1 we read, "The LORD says to my Lord: 'Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.'" In 2 Corinthians 2:14 Paul says, "But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere."

We serve a God who always conquers his enemies! None can stand against him or stop his glorious purposes. He's an unbeatable and unstoppable warrior. His victory is inevitable. Evil will not ultimately triumph in this world. At the cross, Christ secured the final victory for all of God's people and broke the power of Satan. A day is soon coming when Christ will return, and evil will be vanquished once and for all. Satan will be flung into the Lake of Fire, and the wicked will receive just punishment for the evils they've

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committed. The final victory of God is secure. He has already won and is now in the process of finishing off his enemies.

We live in a world that's rife with evil, and our hearts are longing for good to triumph. We want assurance that evil won't have the final victory and that good will emerge from all the pain. In God we find that victory.

Victory in sports is a faint reflection of our victorious God. He's created us to love victory. No one enjoys losing. Part of the reason we have such a passion for victory is that it allows us to catch a faint glimpse of God's glory. Granted, our motives for wanting victory are often smeared with pride and arrogance. But victory in and of itself can be something very good. God is the great warrior king, the great victor and conqueror. When we witness victory, we are witnessing a small piece of the character of God.

We also love victory because it proves that diligence is rewarded. Throughout Scripture we are told that God is pleased by those who do their work faithfully. Proverbs 13:4 says, "The soul of the sluggard craves and gets nothing, while the soul of the diligent is richly supplied." Impressive victories rarely come without hours of grueling work and preparation. The best teams in sports are those that sweat blood on the practice field. They run the same drill over and over until they can do it in their sleep. They spend hours in darkened rooms analyzing film of the opposing team, so that by the time game day rolls around they're ready for anything. It's good and God-honoring to see a team's hard work pay off, and nothing is more unsatisfying than seeing a team get a win they didn't deserve. In a sense we want to see good triumph over evil in this situation as well. We certainly want to see hard work triumph over laziness. We want to see diligence and perseverance have the final victory.

So by all means, pursue victory! Pursue the joy that God gives

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to the victorious. Not for your own glory or honor, but because in victory you will see a glimpse of God himself. When you find yourself on a winning team, direct your heart and mind to God, and praise him that he is always victorious. Thank him for the joy that comes with victory. Praise him for the victories that he's achieved in your life. Praise him that he always leads you in his triumph. Acknowledge that he's the only one who never loses and is always victorious. Pursue victory for the glory of God.

THE JOY OF SELF-FORGETFULNESS

Not only do we receive joy as we pursue excellence and victory, but sports also bring us joy by giving us temporary self-forgetfulness. This idea may sound odd to some, so let me take a moment to explain.

Have you ever had a moment when you were so engrossed with something that you completely forgot about yourself? Something that grabbed your attention so forcefully that you forgot about your wants and worries and desires? This happened to me several years ago during a trip my brother and I took to Yellowstone National Park. Several times while hiking through the park we came upon scenes so beautiful that they stopped us in our tracks and caused us to stare in wonder. Snowcapped mountains, crystal streams, and deep, meandering valleys riveted our attention with their astonishing beauty and caused our hearts to be filled with praise for the God who made them. The effect of all this was that I often simply forgot about myself and the things that concerned me. My eyes and thoughts were fixed on the glories that surrounded me and the God who created them all.

In Psalm 8:3–4 David tells of a similar experience he had when gazing up into the night sky. He says, “When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you

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have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?” David was lost in wonder as he gazed up at the starry sky and contemplated the infinite glory of God.

It’s good for us to forget about our needs and desires from time to time. By nature we’re very selfish and are inclined to think only of ourselves. Our society tells us that life is all about us. It encourages our selfishness. Sports, however, like nature, provide us an opportunity to fix our attention on something other than ourselves. They demand our fullest attention for a short span of time, and as we focus on the game itself we tend to temporarily forget about ourselves. Granted, there are many times when sin invades our self-forgetfulness and once again turns our focus inward, like when we feel that we’re not getting the ball enough in a game of basketball. But in general, sports allow us to be self-forgetful, and that’s a wonderful gift from God. There is something very healthy, mentally and emotionally, about self-forgetfulness. In his book *The Hidden Smile of God* John Piper says: “Periodic self-examination is needed and wise and biblical. But for the most part, mental health is the use of the mind to focus on worthy reality outside ourselves.”⁴

Isn’t God kind to give us the gifts of sports? They allow us to focus our minds on a reality that’s completely outside ourselves. When I play pickup basketball, I’m temporarily transported out of the swirling mass of subjective thoughts and emotions that would normally occupy my mind and into a rock-solid world of layups, rebounds, and crossover dribbles. This is a very good thing indeed. Self-centeredness only leads to unhappiness and misery. Sports are gifts from God that allow us to temporarily forget about self.

THE JOY OF CHARACTER

Finally, sports provide us a wonderful means of growing in character. Sports aren't just about swatting a ball with a racket or slapping a puck into a net. Playing sports allows us to develop character traits that will help us throughout our entire lives. Take leadership, for example. Have you ever considered how much leadership is required when playing sports? Like a general commanding an army, a quarterback is the leader of his team, and players look to him for direction. Veterans lead rookies. Strong players lead weak players. Teams that must depend on young and inexperienced players often suffer due to a lack of leadership. If you play sports you are bound to end up in a position of leadership at some point. Learning to lead on the field has tremendous ramifications for what takes place off the field. Businesses need leaders. Churches need godly leaders. God calls men to be leaders in their households. In his kindness, God allows men and boys to learn to lead by playing sports.

At this point let me appeal to fathers. Fathers, help your sons be leaders on the playing field. A leader encourages his teammates and seeks to fire their passion for excellence. He sets an example of hard work for his teammates and humbly encourages others to follow his example. A leader respects his coaches and listens attentively to their correction. Fathers, help your sons be this kind of leader.

Sports also teach the value of perseverance. We live in an emotionally fragile, escapist culture that likes to curl up in the fetal position when things get tough. The Christian attitude, however, should be distinctly different. Hebrews 12:1 tells us, "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and *let us run with endurance* the race that is set before us" (emphasis added).

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Living a life for the glory of God requires endurance. It's not easy to be a Christian. Killing sin is difficult. Pressing on through trials is painful. Contrary to what some pastors are teaching today, Christians aren't immune from pain and trials. In 1 Peter 4:12 we read, "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you." Christians will endure suffering and trials. God calls us to endure such difficulties by his Spirit, so that he might be glorified.

Playing sports helps us learn the value of endurance. Football players must endure excruciating heat and the perils of dehydration during summer football camps. Distance runners must learn to ignore the shooting pains that often seize them in the middle of a race. Heroes emerge by playing through pain. In the 1988 World Series Kirk Gibson became a legend by hitting a game-winning home run in the first game of the series. He wasn't in good health that night. A ripped hamstring and a torn knee were causing him such agony that he didn't even bother to suit up for the game. But by the bottom of the ninth inning Gibson's Dodgers were desperate. Down 4-3, they had one man on and two outs. The Oakland Athletics had their sidearm ace, Dennis Eckersley, on the mound. Dodgers manager Tommy Lasorda asked hitting coach Ben Hines to check on Gibson and see if he might be able to pinch-hit. After checking on Gibson, Hines came back to Lasorda and told him, "He thinks he's got one good swing in him." Lasorda decided to bring him in. Geoffrey Ward and Ken Burns tell us what happened next:

Gibson hobbled to the plate and waited. He knew he'd have just one chance. Eckersley fired five pitches past him. Gibson's bat never left his shoulder. The count was three and two. Then, Eckersley tried a slider. Gibson hurled himself into the pitch and knocked it into the tenth row of the bleachers. . . . It was

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Gibson's only at-bat in the series, but the inspired Dodgers went on to beat the unnerved A's in five games.⁵

God has given us sports to help us learn endurance. Learning to persevere through the pain of sports teaches us how to persevere through the pain of life. This doesn't mean, however, that God-glorifying endurance comes from sheer willpower. Many non-Christians persevere through pain and difficulty without ever glorifying God. God-glorifying endurance is the fruit of a heart that's dependent on God. We glorify God when we persevere through difficulty by his strength rather than our own. What does this look like practically? It looks like praying for strength to continue practicing when our body wants to quit. It looks like praying for endurance to continue running hard in the fourth quarter even when our lungs are on fire. It looks like finding strength from God to practice hard even though you may not get into a single game the entire season. Endurance that glorifies God is dependent on God.

God has given us the gift of sports so that we might learn endurance and perseverance. Let's resolve to find our strength in him on game day. When we find that our strength has vanished and five minutes still remain on the clock, let's turn to God for strength. Parents, you can help your children in this area. When they're tempted to give up after striking out for the fifth time in a row, help them persevere. Direct their attention to the only One who can truly strengthen them. Then take them out to the batting cages and make them hit a hundred balls.

A FITTING RESPONSE

Millions of people around the world take immense pleasure in playing and watching sports. But how many of those people ever thank the One who created sports? How often do I lift my voice

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in thanksgiving after playing a game of softball or a round of golf? Do I ever thank God for the incredible amount of pleasure that I receive from sports? Unfortunately, I often enjoy the gift of sports without ever thanking the creator of sports. This should not be.

Let us resolve from this point forward that we will not enjoy the gift of sports without giving thanks and honor to the Giver himself. Let us recognize that sports are indeed gifts from a generous God to undeserving sinners, and let our enjoyment of sports be marked by thankful hearts. In this way we will enjoy sports for the glory of God.