

A Discussion of Sports

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The debate over interscholastic athletics has gone on among Protestant Reformed people in the Grand Rapids area for some time now. An outside observer who had followed this debate over the years may have noticed a pattern to the discussion that goes something like this:

1. Debates over matters of school policy among us often generate much more heat than light.

2. These discussions often take the form of verbal artillery duels. The idea of these debates is neither to teach nor to learn from the other side. The goal is, rather, to blast the opponent so far off the field that he will, once and for all, shut up.

3. At some stage in the disagreement some proponents of one position will declare that all those who disagree with them are insufferably stupid and far too pig-headed even to talk with. Some proponents of the other position will declare that their consciences simply will not permit them to support the Christian school if the school board accepts the position of their opponents.

4. At this point things quiet down a bit. Some people are not

speaking to each other. Others, who wish to be polite, just do not bring up divisive subjects.

5. This relative peace and quiet lasts until the next item comes up that requires a decision, whereupon the cannon are rolled out again and the battle rages afresh.

Our outside observer may not, as a result of watching this spectacle, be entirely aware of what high regard Protestant Reformed people actually have for each other.

I do not believe that I have exaggerated (very much) the way in which the discussion of the place of sports in our schools has taken place. For that reason I am glad that the *Perspectives* has provided an opportunity to address this matter. I am confident that in this journal those of us who hold the pro position on competitive sports and those who take the con can debate in a way that will be beneficial for all of us.

As a condition of this talk I would like to ask that all who want to take part accept the following proposition: that is, the debate over competitive sports is between people who want what is good for the children of the covenant. This is not a debate

between people who are idealistic and people who are not. Even less is it a disagreement between people who are willing to compromise Scriptural principles and people who are not. This is a matter having to do with school policy. We want to find the best way to educate covenant young people. This proposition must be accepted because it is factually true (more on this farther on), but also because we will not trust each other or listen to each other if we do not believe this. Anything that we say will only be an effort to overawe, humiliate, or otherwise force the other into being quiet. If we try to do that, then we are simply back to our verbal artillery battle.

I believe, Gary, that you have made two errors in your argument. First, in stating and refuting the case for sports, you set up a straw man. Second, I believe that you describe a standard of behavior for young people which is not required by Scripture as if it were.

Beginning with the straw man, you write that interscholastic athletics has become a pedagogical idol. More good things are attributed to sports than are expected of any of the other, more important, parts of the school program. I take this also to mean that blessings are expected from interscholastic sports which it cannot possibly deliver

and that it has come to be considered one of the most important things that our schools can offer. I call this description of the situation a straw man because I do not believe it is accurate. I do not know of any one who has anything to do with sports in Protestant Reformed schools who makes of athletics a pedagogical idol. I was involved in a school sports program for several years. I did not believe that a young person could receive more benefit from sports than from academics or music, and I certainly did not think that sports were anything near the most important things we could give our children. The coaches with whom I worked abhorred such an idea. Together we put out a good deal of effort to make sure that sports did not become a pedagogical idol. I am not aware that any Protestant Reformed school has acted as if students will learn more good things playing basketball than they could in class, catechism, or young people's society. I am talking about school boards, teachers, and coaches. These are the people or groups that set sports programs up, run them, and have the most to say about policies and the role that sports will have in Protestant Reformed education. In my experience boards, teachers, and coaches have insisted that athletics have a lesser role in the student's life. There

are some who have decided that sports has no role to play at all. It is also my experience that our parents believe the same things. Some do not allow their children to take part in interscholastic sports. Most of those who do also believe that sports is one of the less important things in their children's lives. Maybe now is a good time to talk about the exceptions.

I cannot deny that some Protestant Reformed people do act as if competitive sports are much more important than education. Nor is it much of a secret that some Protestant Reformed people make fools of themselves by the way in which they act at basketball games. And it is a grief to all who have been involved in sports that among those with whom they go to church there are some who think it is their right to malign the coach who does not win enough games or anyone else who does not show enough "school spirit," as they call it. But about this there are some things that should be said. First, to the best of my knowledge, people who act in the way described above have nothing to say about how sports programs are run in our schools. Second, to write as if that behavior is representative of the situation is inaccurate and much less than fair to the great majority of parents, board members, teachers, and

coaches who have tried to instruct children differently. Our schools have consistently required that sports take a back seat to church activities and other school programs. Games have been rescheduled or forfeited in order that students could attend catechism, lectures, and music programs. Students are instructed on how they must behave at games, and, if you have noticed, are usually not among the offenders when their parents or older brothers or sisters misbehave. Athletes are disciplined when they break codes of behavior or do not meet academic requirements. They are kept from playing, regardless of their athletic ability, the effect that their suspensions will have on the win-loss record, or their family connections. In these ways Protestant Reformed schools have distinguished themselves among other schools, public and Christian. It is not enough simply to grumble that "that is the way it is supposed to be." It is true that our culture makes an idol of sports and therefore necessary that those who run and support our sports programs resist that temptation. When they do so, it should be recognized as evidence of the sanctification that God's people have as a result of their regeneration.

My second argument, Gary, with your case against sports has to do with the manner of be-

havior that you imply is binding for all of us. You state, "interscholastic sport promotes poor stewardship of time and ability," and in the rest of your article indicate that the student should spend all of his time out of school in academic pursuits, in studying the Scripture, and in discussion of the Bible with other young people. As I understand your article, you believe that a systematic and disciplined pursuit of a sport is useless in itself, distracts a person from doing much more valuable things, and is evidence of nonchalance (at best) toward spiritual and mental development. I am not sure whether you were exaggerating in order to make the point or whether you stated your case exactly as you believe it. I do think that a young person who took the line of your argument and the tone of your article at face value would feel a guilty conscience for diverting any time at all into athletic activity. That alone makes the issue serious enough to warrant some discussion.

It is necessary to make a distinction between those things that a Christian must do and those things which he may do. We agree that the child of God who is a student must learn his lessons to the best of his ability. He must study the Scriptures regularly and use the means that are provided to him to grow in grace. This refers

to the worship service, catechism, and Bible discussion. I would also say that instruction in music falls among the "musts," but that is a different matter. It does not follow from this that the student must do these things all of the time. This is neither necessary nor desirable, and I think it better that a young person have a broader range of activities in order to develop a broader range of abilities. Indeed, the best students that I have known, or read of, planned some form of diversion, entertainment, into their schedules knowing that this would allow them to work more effectively. What is much more important, though, is that it is not good education or sound nurture to tell a child that he is guilty of spiritual indifference if he regularly takes part in a leisure time activity. I have no desire to make a caricature of your position, but you appear to say both of these things when you write "...just as surely as our baptismal vows bind us to teaching our children the difference between good and evil, so they demand that we teach the difference between 'good' and 'better' and 'best.' Are we willing to stand before the face of God and tell Him that the hours and effort spent in interscholastic sport are the best possible use of our time and ability?" and "Athletic skills are fundamentally,

undeniably leisure skills. Athletic games are just that — mere games.... We are engaged in unceasing struggle; why are we training those who will someday be the generals and footsoldiers in the Army of the Cross how to behave on furlough from a battle that has no end?"

I am not aware that the Scripture lays such a burden of guilt on the believer who regularly takes part in an activity which for him is a form of entertainment. If the Christian takes part in an activity which is itself not forbidden by God's Word, then the principle that applies is that he may exercise his own judgment. If he does not allow that activity to keep him from his obligations and does the activity in a way which does not lead his brother to sin, then he may enjoy it with a clear conscience. And if in the course of that entertainment the believer behaves in accordance with Scripture, acts in faith, and exhibits love for God and for his neighbor, then he may believe that he does God's service in doing that activity.

Let's apply this to sports. I took Miss Lubbers' article to mean that interscholastic sports do not keep a student from more important activities, but rather present another set of opportunities for students to develop their talents. She showed that this is true by using statistical

evidence. This is also my experience. Motivated students did not perform less well during their athletic seasons. Students who were not so motivated did not try to blame their poor performance on the fact that they were on a team. Furthermore, if the Christian athlete exercises godly self control when he competes, obeys coaches and officials willingly, and shows love for the neighbor against whom he is competing, then he should not be told that his wearing a team uniform is incompatible with his putting on the whole armor of Christ. He may expect God's blessing when he prays for the grace of sanctification, and I am glad to hear that that prayer is often made by the team members of Protestant Reformed schools just before games. Finally, the sensitive Christian parent is aware that there are many forms of entertainment that are not good, and that not every child is immune to temptation. The parent may see that when his child is involved in a sports program he is under the supervision of an adult who shares the parent's faith and that the child is associating with other covenant children. He may believe that his child is indeed involved in an activity in which he may learn good things and is avoiding the temptation to get involved in forms of entertainment which are worldly and

