

## REVIEW ESSAY

***Touchdowns for Jesus and Other Signs of Apocalypse: Lifting the Veil on Big-Time Sports.*** By Marcia W. Mount Shoop, Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2014, 115 pp.

Matthew S. Vos, Covenant College

As Jesus plans his return to God's beleaguered creation, his most pressing redemptive tasks must surely include rescuing those who bear his image from big-time sport. Were a theological anthropologist from some distant world to visit ours, she would observe the unabashed allegiance many Christians have to stadium (temple?) sports, marveling at their all but unqualified devotion, and would be curious about how the violence, racism, sensuality, and bravado of big-time sports receive such a resounding Christian "thumbs-up." She might wonder why so many Christian ministers begin sermons with campy in-group sports references, and how intricate Pauline theologies are not infrequently explained using "good 'ol boy" football analogies. Were she to visit an American college football game, the Super Bowl, or the FIFA World Cup, she could not conclude that we are a secular people (for these are our religious feasts), but neither would she find that the Bible is really our "playbook," at least when it comes to sports. Our visiting anthropologist would certainly notice how eagerly we initiate our sons into the priesthood of sports, and how readily we surrender our daughters as vestal maidens to the thronging gawkers who worship in its stadia. And the veil which separates big-time sport from serious theological scrutiny would surely not escape her gaze. In fact, our new friend might indeed be puzzled by the ways in which many practices objectionable – even egregious – to Christians are sacralized and hailed as virtuous when embraced under the sheltering canopy of sport.

It is this veil which Reverend/Dr. Marcia W. Mount Shoop seeks to peel back. In *Touchdowns for Jesus and Other Signs of Apocalypse*, Shoop examines big-time sports, bringing them under her well-qualified gaze. She is unusually well-credentialed for such a task as this – she has a Ph. D. in religious studies from Emory University, is an ordained Presbyterian minister, and has experience as a Division III collegiate athlete. Shoop won the 1991 National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Woman of the year for the State of Kentucky, and was that same year one of ten national finalists for NCAA Woman of the year for the entire NCAA. Additionally, and a significant part of the experience she brings to the book, she is married to John Mount Shoop, former offensive coordinator for the Chicago Bears, Assistant football coach at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and until 2015, coach at Purdue University in Indiana. Shoop's experiences in professional football, as well as at UNC during the 2010 investigation

into the Chapel Hill football program, provide many sobering anecdotes which form the backbone of her analysis. Several of her stories – observations which juxtapose her role as pastor and theologian with her husband’s position as football coach – are themselves worth the price of the book. In the opening paragraphs of the first chapter, Shoop explains how in her pastoral role she fields more questions (really just suggestions) about “the team,” and her husband’s coaching and game-predictions, than about evil in the world, life after death, and the meaning of life itself!

*Touchdowns* extends a call to take sports more seriously. “Far from being trivial and distracting” writes Shoop, “sports embody our deepest longings and desires and our most tenacious distortions” (11). Sports reveal much about who we are. In fact, our engagement with sports, from youth leagues up to professional sports, probably tells us more about ourselves than does any other social institution or human endeavor, including religion. Shoop observes, for example, that it is within sports arenas that we are free to release and experience emotions that are forbidden or frowned upon elsewhere. But, despite the illuminating window sports provides into our collective souls, they are rarely critically examined, especially in ways which take seriously their spiritual import. For Shoop, sports are ripe for theological and social analysis and criticism, because what we really believe about God, ourselves, and our fellow human beings is nowhere more clearly evidenced than in our involvement with sports.

In *Touchdowns*, Shoop uses specialized religious language that may be more familiar to readers in particular theological traditions. Early in the book she defines her task as one of unveiling, naming, and exorcising the “demons” and demonic distortions that animate big-time sports. While her meaning is reasonably clear, it would have been more helpful had she more intentionally explained what she means by demons. Are demons synonymous with spiritual forces, such as those identified by the apostle Paul in Ephesians 6:12 – “For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places” (RSV), or does she mean demons as commonly used in the secular “battling my demons” sense? Can people get rid of demons, and once they are exorcised (or restrained), are the sinful tendencies of sports fans muted? Given Shoop’s self-identification as a theologian and pastor, the reader would expect and benefit from additional theological instruction about how to think about big-time sports with respect to these two different, yet connected, ways of understanding the demonic. Are we just battling ourselves, or are wicked forces separate from us responsible for the distortion in big-time sports? And, how are “our” demons related to the demons identified as “principalities and powers?” This small criticism here may simply reflect discomfort with theological terminology rarely employed in many Christian traditions. What is not lost, and what is most important, is Shoop’s admonition that negative spiritual forces (call them what you will) are “alive and well” in big-time sports, and that part of our work as God’s redemptive agents is to expose them to the light, and reveal their distortions.

Redemption is a key concept in this book. Shoop sees our frenetic, hopeful, sometimes despairing, and undeniably serious involvement with sports as evidence of a yearning for redemption, as a signpost of our longing for things to work, for right to prevail, and for an exciting and triumphant finish. And sports are well-suited to deliver many of these things. Sports can point us to God, offer a kind of transcendence, and complement our call to bear witness to a world dying from human sinfulness. But without exorcising its demons, sport can produce frustration, compromise our loyalties, and show the world something in us which falls far short of a willingness to take the lesser seat.

*Touchdowns for Jesus and Other Signs of Apocalypse* stands as one of the most provocative titles in the relevant literature. The title at first appears to indicate an anti-sport diatribe relating sports to doom and end times, perhaps reason enough to purchase the book! But this is not the case. Shoop explains that the theological meaning of apocalypse refers to an unveiling, writing that “Looking for signs of apocalypse is a quest for truth – truth that can both convict and transform us” (9). She further writes, “In this book we are letting sports instruct us about our distortions and about our capacity for redemption” (10). While it may take a few tries to fully understand this idea – that looking at sports head on, with no blinders, can help us peel back the veil and gain profound insight into ourselves – it enacts a practice familiar to sociologists and other prophetic voices. And with this explication of the theological meaning of apocalypse, Shoop walks the reader through prominent dimensions of big-time sport, focusing our gaze, peeling back the veil, and plunging us into much-needed apocalypse. In her words, “Far from heralding the end times, this apocalypse calls for a new beginning” (14).

Following introductory material, the heart of Shoop’s apocalyptic unveiling consists of five chapters that each address substantive “worlds of meaning” in sport. These chapters develop and assess the spiritual meaning of sports fandom, the deeply gendered character of big-time sports, the veiled and not-so-veiled racism and white privilege thriving in college and pro sports, the relationship between big-time college sports and the institutions of higher learning that house them (it is here that Shoop’s emphasis on the demonic becomes really convincing), and together offer an insightful analysis of what it means when we “stir” Jesus into big-time sports. The book concludes with a chapter entitled “Redemption Time” which offers a reiteration of its major themes, and calls the people of God to love sports more – not less – as we learn to recognize our sports-fueled passions as a longing for redemption, and begin to tear off the veil behind which the demons of sport have their way with us.

The concept of the sports “fan” factors prominently in this book. Merging the words “fanatic” and “phantasm,” Shoop coins the term *fantasm*, defining it as follows: “A person who occupies an illusory space in his/her extreme enthusiasm for a sports team. A fantasm embodies subconscious desires, losses, fears, and aspirations in behavior framed as team affection, thus becoming a likeness of him/herself. This likeness displays and elicits primal emotion while directing these feelings toward an apparition of what he/she truly desires. A

fantasm is a figment of redemptive desire” (18). For the sports fanatic, the totality of the sports experience offers a metanarrative for life, a coherence often missing from the mundane rhythms of the day-to-day. For fans, sports just make sense. In sports, the complexity of life is reduced to a series of simple dualities with clear heroes and villains, winners and losers, in-groups and out-groups. And this reduction to simple binaries is a means by which the fantasm “exercises” its demons. Shoop explains that just as the Roman Coliseum offered a forum for gaining domination over the “alien other,” our stadia and arenas appeal to our sense of powerlessness and desire to matter. In the Coliseum and stadium alike, our identities are clear and coherent – we know who we are, and with whom we belong. Accordingly, stadiums offer a kind of transcendence and address some of the hunger we experience.

Similar apocalyptic insight into sports informs the whole book. Though it’s easy to see the baser tendencies of sports fans – and Shoop offers egregious examples of the fantasm vilifying her husband the coach – as little more than human sinfulness rearing its ugly head, we can also see extreme displays of human emotion as a “figment of redemptive desire.” In a world where we are buffeted by forces we cannot understand, let alone control, sports seem to offer the opportunity to fashion the world in the way we think it should be. Sports help powerless people feel vital and powerful. Understanding this impulse behind much fan behavior can help us peel back the veil, head toward apocalypse, and gain insight into who we are, and who we might be with our unveiled passions properly re-directed.

Chapters four, five, and six, respectively, address matters of gender, race, and higher education in big-time sport. Though Shoop is not a sociologist, sociologists will find much to commend in these chapters; she has an admirable command of the terminology used by sociologists and demonstrates sensitivity to sociological nuance. And, as noted, the “inside” experience she brings to her work is astonishing. For example, in writing about the deeply gendered character of big-time sports, Shoop writes of how some NFL teams coached by her husband had team policies preventing her, a woman, from entering his office! “This male enclave encourages stark separations in gender roles” (30). About NFL coaches’ wives she writes, “As far as women and football go, coaches’ wives like me compose the female group who occupy any sort of close proximity to the everyday ins and outs of the football world. And we are not invited to occupy that space with any formal power. We have only threads of opportunity for the informal exercise of power in the way decisions are made and power is wielded” (30).

Shoop insightfully observes that in a world where gender performance has become somewhat more malleable, there are counterforces which seek to preserve those privileged social spaces formerly reserved exclusively for males. The NFL and other big-time sports are some of the strongest of those counterforces. Accordingly, we continue to experience sports in terms of stark gender contrasts – men as powerful agents, women as the sexuo-support system. Sports in their present and past forms are a male phenomenon, and women in big-time

sports, even at more modest levels of play, are not invited to participate as full partners. Shoop concludes that “The anatomy of the football field creates a template for a settled framework around gender” (34). And, “These frameworks around gender have also been propped up by theological and confessional scaffolding constructed into this system through the presence of religious organizations like *Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA)*, *Athletes in Action*, and *Campus Crusade for Christ*” (34). Here, and elsewhere in the book, Shoop expresses her concern that among the chaplains and manifestly Christian organizations that work to partner with and influence big-time sports, theological positions are narrowly drawn, and what counts as Christianity is guarded in ways that exclude alternative voices that might be threatening to the culture of those sports.

Although African Americans are underrepresented in all sports played in America, save three, sports are commonly thought of as the singular arena where our racialized consciousness dissipates and participants square off on equal footing. Most people look at college or professional football, basketball, and baseball, and have the sense that blacks have thrived and even outpaced whites in those environments. Shoop confronts this sports-as-equalizer with a demography of big-time sport, noting that while African American players outnumber white players in the NFL and NBA,

those who benefit the most financially from the world of sports are still disproportionately white. In all of the major professional revenue sports (NBA, NFL, MLB) there is only one African-American who is majority owner of a team, Michael Jordan of the NBA Carolina Hornets. Seventy-eight percent of black NFL players are bankrupt within two years of their retirement, while 60 percent of NBA players are bankrupt within five years of their retirement. (40-41)

Likewise, an examination of the scaffolding supporting NCAA sports reveals the following:

In 2012, 46 percent of Football Bowl Subdivision players were black, 14 percent of the head coaches were black, 100 percent of the conference commissioners were white, 98 percent of the presidents of those schools were white, and 85 percent of the athletic directors of those programs were white. (41)

This racial imbalance, clearly tipped in favor of white benefit, goes a long way toward reinforcing the plantation analogy (rich white owners and an unpaid black labor force) that some sport sociologists have developed (e.g., Eitzen 2000). The thrust of Shoop’s writing on racial imbalance and injustice in collegiate big-time sports is that players, many of them black, are used for revenue generation without much concern for their needs. “When the veil is lifted

we see sports as another example of an American system created by the dominant culture that benefits the dominant culture” (46).

Providing a compelling theoretical explanation for the current racial climate (cultural and structural) in big sports, Shoop develops sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva’s concept of “white habitus.” Bonilla-Silva identifies a post-civil rights “kinder and gentler white supremacy” that maintains white privilege through institutional practices and lifestyles generally seen through a non-racial lens. “This white habitus is ‘a racialized, uninterrupted socialization process that conditions and creates whites’ racial taste, perceptions, feelings, and emotions and their views on racial matters.’ White ‘color blind styles of talking about race without naming it’ are a product of this white habitus” (46).

The concept of white habitus helps us understand how whites employ an “abstract liberalism” in ways that divert attention away from systemic inequality and disparity, and toward values such as “equal opportunity,” “individualism,” and “merit.” Shoop summarizes: “The use of values like individualism helps to create common patterns of blame and accountability that fail to explore the systemic cultures of institutions. White culture focuses on individuals, not groups” (47). Drawing on Bonilla-Silva’s work, Shoop offers a penetrating and firsthand analysis of the ways in which the NCAA, in the guise of fairness, uses this logic to suppress black player grievances, prevent redress of wrongs, and maintain a system that has only the external appearance of fairness. She concludes that “those who stand to benefit and not to be disadvantaged by the system are the ones deciding on and enforcing the rules. Those most disadvantaged by the rules have little or no power in making them” (55). In sports organizations structured and stratified by race, “holding individuals accountable” in the absence of structural reparations tends to contribute to regress in matters of race. Sports, it turns out, has a good way to go before it can stand as a model for healing the racial divide.

*Chapter Six: Higher Learning* offers additional development of some of the issues raised in the preceding chapter on race, since minority student-athletes are often disadvantaged by the NCAA policies which “control” them. Shoop explains that pairing revenue sports with the lofty goals around which American higher education is organized has produced a uniquely American tension. “This strange coupling poses deep ethical and moral challenges to the treasured values of American academic institutions” (61). Shoop’s experiences while her husband coached football at UNC helped her see more clearly the tensions reverberating in college/university big-time sports. Chief among these problems are the professional ethos which characterizes big-time college sports and the way NCAA schools use “rule breaking” as a way to control student-athletes. Interestingly, there is no legal definition for amateurism. Accordingly, the NCAA (who coined the term “student-athlete”) has been able to maintain what are essentially professional sports in academic contexts, through the rhetoric of “individual responsibility” and heavy-handed rule-based control. Shoop writes, “Both the Knight Commission and the NCAA lean heavily on an emotional, visceral reaction that many people

(and many of them people with power in institutions of higher learning) have about athletes being paid for their labor or receiving ‘unfair’ advantage from their status as an athlete” (72).

Though the real issues troubling the uneasy partnership between higher education and athletics are power, equity, and fairness, the NCAA frames them in terms of individual student-athlete deviance. And under the guise of fairness, the NCAA does control athlete deviance. Much of this chapter examines Shoop’s firsthand accounts of student-athletes who were denied due-process, advised to admit (unearned) guilt, and who faced extreme penalties over minor rule infractions. She writes: “The NCAA is the ultimate bully when it comes to keeping this dysfunctional system intact. It creates and maintains an unjust system and then uses punishment of those it is exploiting as its most potent check on aberrant behavior” (75). And, she notes, the institutions who admit these student-athletes do little to protect them from this schoolyard bully. Academic institutions and amateur-turned-professional sports are uneasy bedfellows. Shoop concludes, “The apocalypse when it comes to higher learning and big-time sports may tell us more about what it means to be white in this country than it tells us about academic integrity” (83). “Fans” of any school falling under NCAA governance would do well to read this chapter and think carefully about whether such programs are deserving of their love.

While *Touchdowns for Jesus* does not answer all questions about the intersection of faith and big-time sport – it remains unclear how Shoop views the violence inherent in football, and the self-serving nature of competition itself – the reader comes away with tremendous insight into the uneasy alliance between Christianity and the powerful institutions of big-time sports. We who are people of faith go to great lengths to reconcile the die-to-self message of the gospel of Jesus with the win-at-all-costs-and-the-consequences-be-damned fantasm of big-time sports. We love Jesus and we love sports, but at present Jesus is on the losing side of these loyalties. Touchdowns for Jesus (the practice, not the book!) are comforting to us because they provide us with some small sign that all is well in the realm of the sports we so love. But at present, touchdowns for Jesus are, at best, a trivialization of our faith, and at worst a mockery of the Jesus whose ways we hope to imitate. But it need not be so. Starting to recognize the outrageous ways we interact with big-time sports as a sign of our yearning for redemption may help us begin to think about and experience sports in new ways and to new ends.

*Touchdowns* is not a call to the faithful to distance themselves from big-time sports, but to push in further. Shoop does not ask us to love them less, but to love them more. This pushing in, this peeling back of the veil, will likely be painful, and will expose us to all sorts of excesses in sports and in ourselves. But moving toward apocalypse also has the potential to open us to better ways of thinking and being. If we remain unwilling to unmask big-time sports, we will, intentionally or not, help create ever more fertile ground for racism, sexism, greed, hypocrisy, and the misuse of power. And worst of all, we won’t care. And if that is what our involvement with big-time sports cultivates, perhaps we who see ourselves as the faithful should pull out of these sports altogether. But sports have far too much potential to simply abandon them.

So bring on the Apocalypse!

### References

Eitzen, D. S. September 2000. "The Big-Time College Sports Plantation and the Slaves Who Drive It." *USA Today: The Magazine of the American Scene*. 129 (2664): 26-30.

**Direct correspondence** to Dr. Matthew S. Vos at [Matt.Vos@covenant.edu](mailto:Matt.Vos@covenant.edu)