ESSAY

Longing for Transcendence:
Olympic Gold and Christian Virtue

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The 2024 Summer and 2026 Winter Olympics have come and gone, and as expected, have led us through the vicissitudes of human emotion, from elation to disappointment and back again. During the games, many of us align ourselves with "our" nation's athletes; their success is our success, their failure is our failure. In some ways following the Olympics is like watching one season of a reality TV show, and we immerse ourselves in the soapy drama replete with loyalties, grudges, and alliances played out on global athletic stages. The success of our athletes offers a kind of transcendence, as the worth of various nations is determined by the prowess of their young champions, which in 2024 included an 11-year-old and four 16-year-olds, and in 2026 a 15-year-old. In late modernity, with so little basis for social bonds, there's something so uniting about our collective thrill from the superhuman feats of our champions. At the same time, the darker side of the Olympics entangles us, and we sometimes disparage the athletes of rival nations who fail to meet our standards for fairness, sportsmanship, morality, or even style. Our national ingroup requires an outgroup for downward comparison, and in disparaging our international neighbors, we easily slip into behaviors that undermine our standards for sportsmanship and generosity.

For many Americans, athletics are the epicenter of culture, and despite being labeled "games," their latent function is human identity formation and maintenance. The oft-repeated athlete's mantra, "I knew I wanted to be the best," underscores the identity dimension of sports. But "being the best" and "doing one's best" are very different things. A focus on being the best tends to increase social distance between oneself and others, and the scramble for dominance is not always consistent with the Christian virtues of humility, service, and charity. When we watch the games on television, we learn the backstories of athletes, including the obstacles they have overcome, and their perseverance and fortitude in the quest for gold. These stories are presented as inspiration for the nation's viewing public. They are indeed inspiring, and we are inspired. But how much should we admire and praise the single-minded dedication of the 11, 15, and 16-year-old athletes who competed at these recent Olympics, or the worldviews that compel such unidimensional fortitude? Is sports excellence at such high levels suitable for these children? Does it add up to wholeness in their lives? Perhaps. After the games conclude, gymnastics studios and other training facilities fill up with 8-year-old hopefuls,

the next cycle commences, and we rest our nation's reputation on a new set of young shoulders.

The Olympic motto "Citius, Altius, Fortius" is Latin for "Faster, Higher, Stronger." In 2021, the International Olympic Committee added another descriptor: "Citius, Altius, Fortius – Communiter," the additional word translating as "together." In French, it reads: "Plus vite, Plus haut, Plus fort – Ensemble." It's a good aspirational addition, but the new descriptor is in tension with the Olympic ideals of winning gold and standing atop the winner's podium alone. While the Olympic ideal is to stand apart from others, social disintegration in its myriad forms almost always has pathological effects. Perhaps a more accurate descriptor, in French, might be "sans rival" – without rival. We strive to distance ourselves, to stand apart.

The Olympic motto echoes the heart of the problem that St. Augustine writes about in *The City of God*. Augustine contrasts the city of man, which is formed by love of self, with the kingdom of God, formed by love of God. For Augustine (1998), the former seeks glory, honor, and power (an unholy trinity) from other humans, and "lifts up its head in its own glory" instead of speaking to God: "Thou are my glory, and the lifter up of mine head" (Book XIV, Chapter 28:608). The temporal triumphs of sports are fading and fleeting, and though they can witness to God as gifts developed as praise to God, they can easily misplace the eternal, transcendent goals and goods of the kingdom of God.

I (Matthew) learned to slalom waterski in my 30s. My wife, who grew up skiing while on vacation with her family, convinced me to join a ski club on an engineered lake about 20 minutes from home. In competitive slalom waterskiing, the object is to move diagonally (on one ski) through a pair of entrance-gate floats, maneuver around six orange buoys staggered on alternate sides of the course, and then pass through a pair of exit floats. At the same time, a boat pulls you down course at 30, 32, 34, or 36 miles per hour. The faster speeds are for the younger skiers, and you move down in speed as you get older. If you successfully navigate through the entrance gate, around all six buoys, and leave the course through the exit floats, the rope is shortened, and you try again at the next higher level of difficulty. Moving to ever shorter line lengths is increasingly difficult, and soon enough impossible.

Now in my 50s, I ski far better than in my 30s, working at it with sharper focus and greater dedication. It's exhilarating and admittedly more than a little addictive. I love the mental and physical discipline the sport requires, the challenge of pushing myself, and the camaraderie with my ski friends who are older and more skilled than I am. For me, the reward is primarily intrinsic. Skiing offers an adrenaline-laced reminder that I'm alive and my body still works. But I must admit that I would like to get a lot better, attend more tournaments, and hold my own with ranked skiers in my division. I have no illusions about "going pro," but I want to be good and compare favorably with others.

My water-skiing performance is part of my construction of identity in the groups that are vital to me. From a sociological perspective, behaviors become more meaningful when tied not just to self, but also to important groups. Skiing a short-line pass at 34mph is more meaningful in the context of others; if no one sees the performance, its significance wanes. Other sports are similar. Throwing a basketball through a hoop from half-court is exhilarating when it happens before excited fans in the state finals, but not so much in the absence of witnesses. In golf, a challenging shot out of the rough and into the cup helps align the golfer with a host of important social values, but not if it's lofted in private. Even the hours of private practice many athletes put in are conducted with relevant social groups in mind.

When we teach the sociology and theology of sport at our Christian institutions, we challenge students by asking them how some dimension of sport, such as violence or winning, relates to, reflects, amplifies, or undermines some spiritual need. Why is winning so important to us? What spiritual impulses are we trying to satisfy by crossing the finish line first, or just wanting to be good? Why is it devastating to some athletes to win *only* the silver medal? At the intersection of sport and spirituality, human identity looms large. Sport performance is one way of trying to answer the questions "Who am I?", "What do others think about me?", "Am I significant?", "Does my life have meaning?", and so on. Those who do not engage in a sport themselves, but who watch and follow particular athletes and teams, address these questions, frequently with equal or greater passion, but vicariously through the performance of others. How should Christians in particular contextualize scriptural teaching about taking the lower place, gaining one's life by "losing" it, and finding strength in weakness, with sports in the Olympic games or elsewhere? What place does losing, dying, and subordinating oneself to others have in sports, the centerpiece of so many people's lifeworld? Do the upside-down values of Jesus and the Kingdom of God hold only peripheral importance in this cultural arena where so many search for meaning, transcendence, and significance? Do we relegate pursuit of the fruit of the Spirit to other social fields we find less critical than sports?

Kinesiology professor Shirl James Hoffman writes the following:

> Scripture is unequivocal in its loathing of self-absorption, which, claims Christian ethicist R. E. O. White, "lies behind all wrong social relationships described in the Bible." The Christian is exhorted to "love others as you love yourself," but far greater emphasis is placed on self-denial in order to ensure the welfare of others. The Christian's duty is to bestow honor on others, seek their advancement, recognize their superiority, and show esteem for their gifts. (2010:146)

By contrast, the quasi-religious values celebrated in the Olympics offer a dramatic reversal of their biblical counterparts. In the Olympics, taking the seat of lesser honor is frequently abhorred, and doing one's best is deformed into *being* the best. Love of neighbor, in biblical

context, is a love without national boundaries, but in the Olympics, neighborliness is frequently, albeit with stunning exceptions, extended only to one's compatriots.

Shortly before the 2024 Summer Olympics, champion swimmer Michael Phelps who has won 28 Olympic medals, 23 of them gold, was shown a clip of Australian swimmer Cate Campbell "dissing" American athletes and fans for their chanting ("USA, USA, USA"), cowbell ringing, and other displays of national enthusiasm. Campbell voiced how sweet it was to beat the US in an earlier Olympics. Then, she described her disdain for the US team when their athletes exited the warmup pool and headed to the competition area, accompanied by the revelry above. The clip ended with her comment, "… and I've never wanted to punch someone more." Phelps commented on this less than neighborly display with a diatribe of his own:

> If someone said that to me, I would lose it. I would literally make them eat every word they just said about me. Cause people have done it. Chad LaClos, (Ian) Thorpe, You guys have all talked s--- about me, but I had the last laugh. So, for the Americans, if you see what I just saw—that's the first time I saw it—I would watch that thing every single day to give me that little extra bit of just, umph—Oh, I mean, look, I'm yeah, that, uh-huh, that's awesome. Well, the good news is the Olympics will be here shortly, and we'll be able to see what the results are. (NBC Olympics & Paralympics 2024)

Seen one way, the exchange between Campbell and Phelps represents a relatively innocuous national rivalry. Ingroup/outgroup, we/they. Normal stuff. Sociologists might see this as an example of the dictum, "The greater the conflict between groups, the greater the solidarity within groups." The ingroup benefits from a friendly rivalry, which can help a loosely affiliated group pull together, bonding members more strongly to one another. Rivalries do have essential benefits. But for the Christian, the question "who is my neighbor?" remains—rivalry or not. Can I fortify my identity at the expense of my neighbor? If so, does my neighbor remain a stranger? When does a "friendly" rivalry stop being friendly?

The classical sociologist Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) wrote that society is a reality *sui generis*. In writing this, Durkheim promoted that society had a separate existence from the people that comprise it—the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. At the same time, Durkheim recognized nothing beyond social reality and the empirical world accessible to our senses. The "sacred" that we associate with religion, for example, he saw as a totemic projection of a society's "collective conscience." For Durkheim, transcendence was a function of the system, a projection of the system, and directed toward the fortification of bonds within the system. For Durkheim, transcendence did not actually transcend human social life. As sociologist Joe Scimecca writes,

> Durkheim's theory of religion explains social order as the result of the internalization and power of moral social norms. When communities participate

> in religious rituals by honoring their religious beliefs (and "totems") through worship, they are simultaneously expressing their rededication to the moral order (norms) that binds their clan together. Durkheim suggests that the idea of the "sacred" is essential for social order. There must be symbols that are worthy of awe and respect, and the moral norms generated by the symbols must be internalized. Society, which evolved from the clan, becomes the ultimate sacred entity. Society is the source of the sacred and becomes a symbolic substitution for God. As Nisbet puts it: "the gods are but manifestations or personification of society…." (2024:44)

Sports, for Christians, are frequently legitimated by appeals to the transcendent—to something beyond sports and society. Athletes pointing skyward or taking a knee on the field testify to this outside-the-system loyalty and the importance of conforming to the transcendent. For example, Christian sports organizations like *Athletes in Action* and *Fellowship of Christian Athletes* ground their identities in loyalties beyond the social system. Appeals to Christian identity in sports frequently place "witness" above other, more temporal objectives. It follows that, at least for people of God, sports should evidence the fruit of the Spirit—qualities and characteristics like peace, kindness, gentleness, and self-control. But do they? Do we even want them to?

"When you are weak, then you are strong" is a saying of Jesus that seems out of place in most sports. Consider the following: During the 2024 Paris Olympics, Nike debuted a new commercial entitled, "Winning Isn't for Everyone/Am I A Bad Person?" The commercial features a cadre of A-list celebrity athletes, including Giannis Antetokounmpo, Jakob Ingebrigtsen, LeBron James, Sha'Carri Richardson, Vinícius Jr., Serena Williams, Qinwen Zheng, and A'ja Wilson. Nike CMO Nicole Graham (2024) said this about the commercial's ethos:

> This is about celebrating the voice of the athlete. It tells the tale of what it takes to be the (G.O.A.T) greatest of all time, the unformed legacies that still exist, as well as the hopes that will come true. The legacies that have yet to be shaped. And the dreams that will be made real. It reminds the world that there's nothing wrong with wanting to win.

The commercial's 90-second transcript, read in smooth tones of mocking superiority by noted actor Willem Dafoe, is as follows:

> Am I a Bad Person?
>
> Tell me, Am I? I'm single-minded. I'm deceptive, I'm obsessive, I'm selfish.
>
> Does that make me a bad person? Am I a bad person? Am I?
>
> I have no empathy. I don't respect you (ha, ha, ha).
>
> I'm never satisfied. I have an obsession with power. I'm irrational. I have zero remorse.

> I have no sense of compassion. I'm delusional. I'm maniacal.
>
> You think I'm a bad person? Tell me, tell me, tell me, tell me. Am I?
>
> I think I'm better than everyone else. I want to take what's yours and never give it back.
>
> What's mine is mine, and what's yours is mine.
>
> Am I a bad person? Tell me. Am I?
>
> Does that make me a bad person? Tell me? Does it? (Nike 2024)

"Bad" is, admittedly, a complicated adjective. Still, the sentiment expressed by Nike contains no hint of even a secular version of the fruit of the Spirit described by Paul in Galatians 5:22-23. The thrust of Nike's message is that self-absorption and relentless trampling on others en route to the top represent pro-social values.

For Olympic athletes, the route to *Communiter* is short-circuited by a relentless commitment to separating oneself from one's neighbors, and if the Nike commercial is to be believed, from neighborliness altogether. The Nike vision transposes self-absorption and disdain for neighbors into virtue. Moral philosopher Iris Murdoch (1970), in her "On 'God' and 'Good'," engages with false views of the self where the individual will, as in the "egocentric kind," functions as the enemy of the moral life. She refers to this way of relating as lacking empathy and attentive recognition of the ethical value of others. Rather than the "fat relentless ego," she argues for a just and compassionate vision where doing what is good consists of an "unselfing" when the self is about developing others, which in sports means that the quest for excellence is mutual. Nike's message sets up a false dichotomy regarding the pursuit of winning. Either win and be a bad person or lose and be a good person; winning and goodness are pictured as mutually exclusive. Moral considerations become subordinate to the glorified self.

The history of Christian thought and practice also interprets the character traits embodied in the Nike commercial as vices. Though the advert depicts the inner monologue of a supposed winner's mindset, in reality, the motivations, actions, and attitudes characterize the pursuit of winning as devoid of humility and love. Christian virtue is based on an interconnectedness of humanity, because everyone bears the image of God equally. This shared dignity resists the notion of pride as communicated in the Nike commercial, since pride is the source and fountain of all vices. Pride boosts the self above God, which obscures our dependence on and need for God and others when playing sports and doing life more generally.

Identifying with the transcendent God who directs and sustains the social system necessitates conforming to the means and ends stipulated by that God. And in big sports, including the Olympics, the Super Bowl, and college football, athletes and fans alike seek a Durkheimian transcendence—a pale transcendence created by the social, for the social. And in

such a world, the upside-down values of Jesus and the Kingdom of God, including the fruit of the Spirit, gain little traction and make little sense. In effect, the ways of God are transformed into the ways of men and women.

We need to apply fresh Christian imagination to the world of big sports. Sports has so much ability to reveal who we are and positive potential for who we might become. But often we settle for a sports version of the Turkish Delight described by C. S. Lewis in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. So, what might the Olympics or other big sports look like with an eye on the real transcendent? We're not entirely sure. How do we hold the excitement of international sports in tension with the Christian virtues of care for neighbor, edifying speech, and the Golden Rule? Shirl James Hoffman, in *Good Game: Christianity and the Culture of Sports* (2010) referenced earlier, explores the concept of social distance, writing that we should be cautious about continued involvement in sports where we feel less neighborly, angrier, and less desirous of friendship and interaction with our opponents after a game than at its beginning. Hoffman offers examples of how college teams eating a pregame meal together can subvert the less-than-neighboring "killer instinct" that so many sports seem to require. Hoffman concludes his book with a chapter entitled "Notes Toward a Well-Played Game," stating, "Reimagining sport in the Christian life will require readjusting old views and taking steps to bring the way sports are organized and played into harmony with the new vision" (2010:263). The following is an abbreviated list of questions that Hoffman offers for players, coaches, and spectators to reflect on as they work to understand their sports experiences in light of what we are calling the transcendent:

- Did the experience of competing draw you close to those against whom you competed, or did it drive you further apart?
- Were there occasions during the game when you applauded the efforts of your opponents or shared in their joy or disappointments?
- Were you humble in victory, gracious in defeat?
- How might you construe the experiences of your just-concluded game within the context of your faith narrative? How did they deepen your understanding of joy, love, peace, God's goodness, or your own sense of dependence upon him?
- If the game transported you to "another reality," was it a reality that somehow reflected a vision of your eternal destiny?
- Did you play [or watch] with "expectant alertness," keeping an open heart for the beauty and joys of the game, yet at the same time maintaining a sense of detachment that allowed you to be reflective?
- Did the game consume you with the urge to win? (Hoffman 2010:286-87)

Hoffman's questions push against the so-called virtues promoted in the "Am I a Bad Person?" Nike commercial. Does our involvement in sports lead us to be obsessed with power, to lack empathy, to be more deceptive, to be more selfish? Will our engagement with sports make us more neighborly, more concerned with others than ourselves, and humbler? The answers to these questions are always "yes" and "no." As we look ahead to the 2028 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles, perhaps we can rekindle our collective imagination, fixing our eyes on a better and more accurate form of transcendence than the Turkish Delight of big sport as usual. May the Spirit of God, perhaps through people like us, breathe more *Communiter* into the next Olympic Games. For that, in truth, would be better than Olympic gold.

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