

Interscholastic Athletics in Christian Education

Katie Van Overloop

Katie is a member of Faith Protestant Reformed Church. This article was written for the 2001 Protestant Reformed scholarship.

What is the place of athletics and particularly of interscholastic sports in Christian education? This is an issue that every one of our Protestant Reformed schools has had to struggle with and prayerfully consider. This issue is not an easy one, but there are basic biblical principles that must guide us in considering the place of athletics in our Christian schools. Secondly, one can also look to the examples of other schools; schools both of which have decided to include an interscholastic sports program, and schools that have decided against including an interscholastic sports program.

I have an interest in this issue, the place of interscholastic sports, for several reasons. First, I have been involved in interscholastic sports in college, running cross-country. For me it was a struggle to balance running, academics and devotional time, so that my quiet time with God always came first. Second, I will be student teaching in a Christian school in the fall that has chosen not to include an interscholastic sports program in their curriculum. And third, in the future, if the Lord willing, I will teach in one of our Christian schools, or else I will raise covenant children. Thus, I must formulate for myself the place of sports in the school and in my children's lives.

Many of our Protestant Reformed schools have interscholastic sports programs. There are other Christian schools, however, that have chosen not to have an interscholastic sports program. The Christian school in which I will be student teaching has chosen not to have an interscholastic sports program for several reasons.

The principal of this school gave the following reasons for this decision. First, there is the reality of a small school and the lack of resources. This small school prefers to use its resources to strengthen their academic programs to prepare their students for a career, rather than using their limited resources to build and maintain a sports program. Second, they do not want to give their students an opportunity to find a career in sports. And third, they believe that sports should not have a primary priority in the lives of Christian people. Sports may never become an end in life.

Today in society we see that many people are consumed by sports. For them sports is an idol. In general, many people live for the sports they are involved in and soon, the game and the individual are not God centered, but rather, self-centered. Furthermore, time playing sports and watching sports often takes the place of more important things.

In addition, this principal believes that intramurals can provide the opportunity for physical activity and provide many of the benefits of competitive sports, such as camaraderie and discipline. He also believes that camaraderie and discipline can be developed in the academic areas.

Many of our Protestant Reformed schools, along with other Christian schools, have chosen to include an interscholastic program. Many of our people support these programs on the basis that they provide a great window of opportunities for many students. These opportunities involve the following: lasting friendships are formed and developed within the team; athletes learn discipline trying to balance homework, work, sports, and personal devotions; struggling

academic students have an opportunity to develop their talents in sports, and are provided the motivation to keep up their grades to stay on the team. There are benefits for parents and the rest of the student body, too. Students and parents enjoy Christian fellowship and positive recreation as spectators. At these sporting events athletes and spectators alike are provided the opportunity to learn and to show good sportsmanship.

If a school chooses to have an interscholastic sports program, it must be very careful. At the outset, one must recognize that just as religion must not be a mere “add-on” to our academic curriculum, so religion must not be a mere add-on in athletics. As in the academic curriculum, religion must be at the very heart of the athletic curriculum. Our God is one Lord and He is Lord over all. God is sovereign in every sphere of our life, thus He, as well as His precepts for our lives, must be recognized in every area of education.

Coaches and athletes alike should keep in mind a quote by Heywood Halebroun that says, “Sports do not build character. They reveal it.” One may not agree that “sports do not build character,” but no one can argue the statement that “sports reveal character.” How many times haven’t we seen bad sportsmanship from both the athletes themselves or from the spectators at our own schools or on TV in professional basketball? Athletes, coaches and spectators must always be cautious of their behavior at sporting events. This is primarily because God has commanded us to be “holy even as [He] is holy” ([I Peter 1:16](#)) and to live sanctified lives. We are also commanded to be Christ’s living witnesses to bear His name, and not to bring shame upon the name of Christ.

Like all other forms of entertainment and leisure, we must be led by the Spirit, participating in all things in moderation and keeping our priorities in mind. As Christian young people we must be mature in making our decisions, always asking ourselves whether or not God is truly first in our life. If God has been displaced from the first rung of the ladder of our priorities for athletics, we have made athletics an idol and we must take action. As we read in [Exodus 20:3](#), “Thou shalt have no other gods before me.” We should also keep in mind our confession in the Heidelberg Catechism Answer 1, “that [we] are not [our] own, but belong to [our] faithful Savior Jesus Christ.” Our first priority in life must always be our relationship with our Lord and Savior.

As educators and coaches in Christian schools, we must remember that God’s Word has something to say about all areas of life; about our work, our worship, our education, and our recreation. If we are going to include interscholastic sports in our curriculum, we must apply spiritual principles. We must use God’s Word to guide us in our decisions so we are molded to His image. Our behavior must reflect that we are His image bearers. It is critical that we daily remind ourselves of our priorities: we are first and foremost God’s servants and are pilgrims in this land. We must be reminded that God is more concerned about our spiritual life than our physical life. Students must also be reminded that they must not be involved in their sports or performing their sports “through vainglory, but in lowliness of mind” (Phil. 2:3). All our activities must be done for God’s honor and glory and not for our own honor and glory.

Both supporters and opponents of interscholastic sports provide thoughtful, insightful arguments. If a Christian school chooses to support an interscholastic program, it must do so, as in all other things, under the guidelines of Christian principles. Even athletics must point to Christ and must be used as a means to serve him. This is our goal always in education; to point our students to Christ, using their talents and time for his honor and glory.

Originally Published in:

Vol 62 No 2 February 2003