

"Coming Out Religiously in Sports"
Draft Paper for Colloquia at REA Conference 2013 in Boston
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Addressing participants in the world aquatic championships in the summer of 2009, Pope Benedict XVI declared that "sports, practised with enthusiasm and an acute ethical sense, especially for youth, become . . . a school of formation in the human and spiritual values, a privileged means for personal growth and contact with society."¹ Papal speeches for athletes and coaches at major sporting events in recent decades highlight the educational dimension of sport and the church's concern regarding the influence of sport in society. The Pontifical Council for the Laity's Section on Church and Sport (inaugurated by Pope John Paul II in 2004) exemplifies the church's increased presence in the field of sport, yet how exactly does church leadership hope to use sport as an avenue for religious education? Evangelical Christians like former Heisman trophy winner Tim Tebow and NBA basketball star Jeremy Lin use sport as a platform for proselytization that borders on self-promotion. Is this the model promoted by church leadership for religious educators?

This draft paper is divided into three parts. First, it states its methodology based on a critical model composed by sociologist James Mathisen. He provides an analytical framework that categorizes different historical accounts of Christians who introduce religious faith to sport (i.e., "muscular Christianity"). The model is composed of three categories: how do these Christian groups (1) employ sport? (2) understand religious belief? and (3) view the "outside" culture? Next, with Mathisen's framework acting as an interpretative lens, the study analyzes the writings and speeches explicitly addressing sport as offered by Popes Pius XII, John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis. That is, their words will be judged according to Mathisen's four categories. Based on the analysis, the final part of the presentation will name some of the issues that we will discuss in Boston.

It is hoped that the draft paper and our discussion will shed light upon a path by which faith-based schools, Christian athletic associations, sport chaplains, recreational centers, children's sports leagues, and parents may engage sport with their religious beliefs—offering a challenge to secular assumptions in the sporting world.

Categories for Muscular Christianity

The term "muscular Christianity" was first published as part of a negative review of a series of children's novels in 1857. The author criticised Charles Kingsley and Thomas

¹All papal references are drawn from the following resources: Pope Benedict's sport speeches are contained at the Pontifical Council for the Laity—Church and Sport section, "Magisterium," at <http://www.laici.va/content/laici/en/sezioni/chiesa-e-sport/magisterium.html>; Pope Pius XII's sport speeches are contained in Robert Feeney, *A Catholic Perspective: Physical Exercise and Sports* (Marysville, WA: Aquinas Press, 1995), 27-56; Pope John Paul II's speeches are contained in Kevin Lixey, Norbert Müller, and Cornelius Schäfer, eds., *Blessed John Paul II Speaks to Athletes: Homilies, Messages and Speeches on Sport* (London: John Paul II Sports Foundation, 2012); Pope Francis' one sporting speech as pontiff can be found at <http://www.zenit.org/en/articles/francis-address-to-soccer-delegations>.

Hughes incorporation of inculcating morals and ethics into athletic participation in United Kingdom public schools (Mathisen, 205, 2006).² The attempt to draw sporting pursuits into discussion with religious beliefs and values was made possible because of increased concern for people's health during the industrial revolution and developments in medicine that emphasized the mind-body connection (Watson 2007, 81). Coupled with the threat of war and the need for manly, well-educated leaders in Europe, different Christian groups grabbed on to the idea of wedding the Christian faith with sport.

Mathisen offers an outline of historical attempts of bridging faith and sport in 19th century United Kingdom. He names four types, along with a fifth stemming from the United States and a second wave of evangelistic forms arriving post WWII. Differentiating between these various forms of muscular Christianity, he distinguishes three basic categories: the value given to sport, the view of religion, and the value placed upon culture.

In terms of the value given to sport, Mathisen describes how various forms of muscular Christianity either believe in sports' intrinsic or extrinsic value. Those who support sports' intrinsic value believe that sport is good in and of itself. The primary objective is to promote the benefits of sport for society. Any secondary uses of sport (like "spreading the gospel") are frowned upon because they demean the importance of sport and can act as an impediment for sports to improve cultures and build strong communities. The modern form of the Olympics originated primarily from the thought of Pierre de Coubertin, who underlined the intrinsic value of sport as exemplified in the Olympic ideal of "Faster, Higher, Stronger." For Mathisen, Christians who emphasize sports' extrinsic value see sport as a useful tool for their primary purpose of evangelizing. Prominent examples here lie with the origins of the YMCA and its use of sport to bring urban youth to Christ and the 19th century baseball-player-turned-preacher Billy Sunday who drew upon sporting experiences in his preaching as a way to attract followers.

The second distinguishing character of muscular Christianity is its approach to religion. Here Mathisen distinguishes between those who place emphasis on a communal religious ethos and those who focus on the individual and his/her salvation. For example, Hughes and Kingsley's work in UK public schools engaged a communal or shared ethic for their religious view. Their approach, then, sought to bring persons together in athletic pursuits in order to promote a shared vision of how people should treat each other. On the other hand, evangelists like C.T. Studd directed athlete-led missionary tours to China as a means to win over individual adherents to Christ. His approach to religion focused on the individual salvation of those interested in sport rather than a common shared ethic through sport.

The final distinctive character of muscular Christianity is each group's view of human culture. Mathisen argues whether each group seriously criticizes the wider culture or the specific sporting culture, or if the example of muscular Christianity offers

² James Mathisen's categories for muscular Christianity and its related history can be found in "Toward an Understanding of 'Muscular Christianity': Religion, Sport and Culture in the Modern World," in Heintzman, Van Andel, and Visker, eds., *Christianity and Leisure: Issues in a Pluralistic Society* (Sioux Center, IA : Dordt College Press, 2006), 203-219.

no such criticism and may even endorse the values of mainstream culture. In light of the cultural setting of the UK in the nineteenth century, Hughes and Kingsley employed sports as a way to uphold higher ideals of the past and offer a critique of society that was not—in their eyes—as physically fit, strong, or ready to lead. In current times, missionary work of groups like Sports Ambassadors or Athletes in Action promote American mainstream values along with their proclamation of the gospel when traveling around the global on mission trips. Values are exported on a global level.

Based on these three categories, one can differentiate between the many manifestations of muscular Christianity in the nineteenth century:

Title	Brief Description	Sport: Intrinsic Value	Sport: Extrinsic Value	Religion: Shared Ethos	Religion: Individual Salvation	Culture as Negative	Culture as Positive
Classical	Hughes and Kingsley's promotion of sport for youth in UK public schools	X		X		X	
Idealist	Baron de Coubertin's vision of sport for the modern Olympic movement	X		X			X
Urban-Secular	YMCA's employment of gymnasiums as a means to evangelism beyond the UK.		X	X			X
Evangelical	C.T. Studd and "Cambridge Seven" use sport to promote Christianity in China		X		X		X

Separatist	Billy Sunday leaves professional baseball to become a noted itinerant evangelist.		X		X	X	
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Mathisen notes that by the end of World War I there remained little of an organized sense of muscular Christianity. Groups like the YMCA took on an accommodation stance and lost their evangelism flavor. Others, like Billy Sunday’s separatist approach, pushed further away from sport and avoided sporting culture. Despite this, a new wave of muscular Christianity came forth around WWII. US evangelicals, like track star Gil Dodds and the Youth for Christ movement (which included Billy Graham), employed sport as a means of spreading the gospel. They typically followed the evangelical model in the table above. Mathisen notes some discrepancies in approaches among these evangelicals. There are a minority that perform specialized ministry for elite athletes (i.e., sports ministry), others combine their evangelistic flavor with a social cause like prison reform (i.e., social action), and others set out to establish a Christian collegiate culture for college athletes (i.e., NCCAA). These discrepancies are the exceptions rather than the rule since there is a strong tendency toward the evangelism model.

Analysis of Papal Speeches

For educators, the link between sport and Catholicism appears most prominent in Catholic high schools and colleges. Sports seem to be an assumed part of life at these institutions. Noteworthy, however, is that there is no official magisterial teaching on sport and faith. What model within Mathisen’s analysis should be followed? What role does religious education have within the sports realm?

Despite no systematic teaching on sport and faith, several popes over the past seventy years have offered speeches to mark the beginning of a major sports event or in hosting a group of athletes, coaches, and administrators. Speaking to a variety of organizations that presumably have little theological training, Popes Pius XII (1939-1958), John Paul II (1978-2005), Benedict XVI (2005-2013), and Francis (2013-) have shown a desire to meet listeners in their particular situation and usually speak in general terms about biblical or patristic writings. The topics are wide ranging (i.e., ethics, athletes as role models, St. Paul’s teaching on sport, the goodness of sport, sacrifice, education, etc.) and the depth of sporting knowledge seems to vary among the pontiffs. More “traditional” sports—like soccer, swimming, track and field, and the Olympics—are usually addressed. The numerous speeches overall present the basic shape of a papal approach to muscular Christianity through the repetition of some themes more than others and greater depth presented on some topics. The importance of the subject appears to be heightened with the Second Vatican Council’s inclusion of sport in

Gaudium et spes (n. 61) as part of a larger vision to read the signs of the times and engage the modern world.

Based upon Mathisen's three categories, papal teaching on sport seems to best to coincide with a classical approach to muscular Christianity. That is, it supports the intrinsic value of sport; it places emphasis on a common religious ethos that sport can uphold; and it remains critical of mainstream culture in light of the vision of the human person offered in the gospel. Below are extracts taken from papal speeches that reveal a classical approach to sport and faith. When appropriate, distinctions between the style and substance of each pope's writings are noted.

Intrinsic Value of Sport

The clearest sign of more recent popes' embrace of sport is the repeated meetings with athletes and organizers of sport. They do not limit their visit to "Christian" athletes, but rather are open to meeting with those who devote endless time to sporting endeavors.

With Pope John Paul, the teaching body of the church embraces sport. Speaking to Italian and Argentinian soccer teams near the start of his papacy, the pope draws upon the work of early church father Tertullian and his emphasis on the unity of the body and spirit. John Paul II concludes:

I have wished to underline this point because it is the keystone upon which rests the evaluation which the Magisterium gives to the discipline of sport. This is a highly positive evaluation in light of the contribution that these disciplines make towards one's integral human formation. Athletic activity, in fact, when practiced in the right way, tends to develop strength, proficiency, resistance, and harmony, while favoring at the same time interior growth, becoming a school of loyalty, courage, endurance, tenacity, and brotherhood (11).

In drawing upon St. Paul's use of sporting metaphors, the pope claims that St. Paul "recognized the fundamental *validity of sport*, considering it not just as a term of comparison to illustrate a higher ethical and aesthetic ideal, but also in its intrinsic reality as a factor in the formation of man and as a part of his culture and his civilization" (21). Again in speaking to a group of professional soccer players, John Paul II states: "I am convinced that sport, when it is not transformed into a myth, is an important factor of social and moral education, both on the personal and communitarian level."

Throughout his speeches, John Paul II has an ideal of sport—as something that can build up the human person through a complete education of the mind, spirit, and body. For him, it is like there is a true platonic form of sport. This form is the true objective reality of sport.³ Some people, through an obsession to win or profit from sport, spoil the very heart of sport. However, Pope John Paul calls upon Christians and all people of goodwill to tend to the sporting endeavor. At the Jubilee of Sports People in 2000, the pontiff directs this concern to his audience:

³ The irony of JPPII's sporting ideal (as highlighted in his use of St. Paul and elsewhere) is that such a thing has never existed. He has taken what he finds best in other sports, holds these up as an ideal and then compels others to embrace it. In reality, he is calling forth something new that is shaped only partially by some sporting ideals of the past.

Because of the global dimensions this activity has assumed, those involved in sports throughout the world have a great responsibility. They are called to make sports an opportunity for meeting and dialogue, over and above every barrier of language, race or culture. Sports, in fact, can make an effective contribution to peaceful understanding between peoples and to establishing the new civilization of love (58).

Here he silently acknowledges the dark side of sports, but nevertheless expresses his belief in a sporting ideal that carries great value.

Although Popes Benedict and Pius do not show the same exuberance for sport as John Paul II, they nonetheless express their support of sport in numerous speeches on the topic. Perhaps it is somewhat surprising that a pre-Vatican II era pope—Pius XII—gave several speeches on sport, some of which offer specific principles for sport from a religious point of view. Pope Pius notes the growing prominence of sports people and the sports media (44-45) and thus demands that the church and those outside of religion do not push Christianity into “exclusively spiritual” affairs (27). In one speech, he offers a lengthy personal reflection on the possible physical and spiritual benefits of mountain climbing in a style that is which reveals the benefits of the endeavor (37-40).

Even though he speaks highly of sport, his primary concern surrounds those who see sport as an end in itself rather than as a means to the virtuous life (31). He repeats the need for proper balance with sport: “The Church, without any doubt whatever, approves of physical culture, if it be in proper proportion.” Athletes, in not taking sport as an end in itself, should avoid sports for mere pleasure or that leads to the worship of the body. (40). A similar line of thinking is at times found in Pope Benedict. To the participants of the World Aquatic Championships in Rome in 2009, the pontiff declares: “The Church follows and encourages sport, practised not as an end in itself, but as a means, as a precious instrument for the perfection and balance of the whole person.” While asserting that sport cannot be the final goal of the athlete, Benedict XVI—like John Paul II—confirms that sports is “an authentic human value . . . for human formation and as an element of human culture and civilization.” This description underlines the significance the pontiff places on sports, despite the potential to skew their beneficial place in education.

One topic of note unites these pontiff’s positive view of sport—the joy of play. Late in his pontificate, John Paul II offers a paragraph length reflection on the value of play and the joy found in sport (23; also see 65). Pope Benedict, as a cardinal in the late 1970’s, offered a brief reflection on “the beautiful game” which includes mention of the joy and emotion of sport. Prior to either pontiff, Pope Pius (surprisingly) acknowledges the joy found in pursuing sport: “it is the joy which comes from this power and action, not unlike that which the artist experiences when he wields and masters his instrument” (45). Apparently the pontiff’s concern about not viewing sport as an end did not exclude the person from feeling the “energies enclosed within the body” (45).

A final word goes to the current Pope, whose reign began this year. Pope Francis delivered a sporting speech of some significance to the national soccer teams of Italy and Argentina. The discourse challenged professional soccer players to consider the core values of amateur sport—gratuitousness, comradeship and beauty—because these build

up the common good of society. In supporting “true sport,” Francis upholds John Paul II’s vision of the intrinsic value of sport—based in part on Francis’ own love of soccer and his beloved San Lorenzo soccer team in Buenos Aires —calls upon athletes to strive for the higher ideals for sport.

While papal speeches warn of the pitfalls of sport, it would be wrong to say they see sport in a negative light (as described by Mathisen’s categorization). Instead, these popes see something religious at the core of sporting activities. “Sport” as an objective activity played universally by all people is viewed as an objective category for the promotion of the human person. Sport is understood as a human universal played throughout the ages. It has spiritual qualities that cannot be overlooked. This is what is emphasized, especially in John Paul II’s teaching. Despite problems with modern sport, the pontiffs believe that engagement in sport is a valued endeavor and can support the education of the human person. Based upon this position, it is valuable to see how they see religion acting within sport—the topic of the next section.

A Shared Religious Ethos

The papal approach to religion in muscular Christianity strongly emphasizes a shared ethos among all participants in sport. That is, the pontiffs generally see sports’ capacity to bring persons together in sporting events—despite people’s differences—and thus reveal shared human values that underline the unity of all human persons. The common support of these values is similar to common beliefs and values between religions as often found in inter-faith dialogue.

Pope John Paul II’s speeches affirm the shared ethos that the Catholic Church supports for the building up of the human person. This perspective is made clear in many settings. To competitors in a major waterskiing event the pontiff states: “when [sport] is practiced at the international level, then it becomes a propitious element to overcome multiple barriers, in such a way as to reveal and strengthen the unity of the human family, beyond all differences of race, culture, politics or religion” (12). To a meeting with presidents of Italian Sports Federations he repeats sports ability to educate all people in human values: “[Sport] is a training ground of virtue, a school of inner balance and outer control, an introduction to more true and lasting conquests” (14). Pope John Paul sees in sport “a real instrument of reconciliation in the world” (33), and subsequently asks a group of tennis players, “Cannot the values enshrined in sport open new horizons of humanism and solidarity to vast sectors of the world’s young people?” The pontiff declares his belief in a common ethos among all who participate in sport, even to the extent of hoping for a type of renaissance through sports.

The pope’s emphasis on the shared ethos amongst all sports people is not the entire story. John Paul II consistently endorses this communal dimension, yet also adds an evangelical declaration for religion to be seen as a means of conversion to Christ. In a homily given at the Olympic Stadium in Rome in 1984, the pontiff endorses the Olympic Charter’s pronouncement that sport can increase understanding among people and thus lead to a more peaceful world (21). He called upon the audience to let their meeting “be a symbolic sign for the whole of society and a prelude to that new age in which nations ‘shall not lift up sword against nation’ (Is 2:4)” (22).” In spite of this endorsement, the

pope asks attendees “to strive beyond the world of sport, for the salvation of modern man, for the coming of those ‘new heavens’ and that ‘new earth’ (2 Pt 3:13) for which all of us are yearning with the ardor of Christian hope” (22). Here is the tension in the pope’s presentation—his approach to religion in sport is one of supporting a common ethos, along with considering the salvation of individuals. The same can be said of a homily given at the Jubilee of Sports People in 2000. He compels every Christian to “become a *strong athlete of Christ*, that is, a faithful and courageous witness to his Gospel” despite earlier in the speech giving his most memorable pronouncement about the capacity of sport to act as a common basis for creating a new world:

Sport that protects the weak and excludes no one, that frees young people from the snares of apathy and indifference, and arouses a healthy sense of competition in them; sport that is a factor of emancipation for poorer countries and helps to eradicate intolerance and build a more fraternal and united world; sport which contributes to the love of life, teaches sacrifice, respect and responsibility, leading to the full development of every human person (3).

Pope Benedict affirms his predecessor’s embrace of a valued common ethos in a speech to participants of the World Aquatics Championships: “sports, practised with enthusiasm and an acute ethical sense, especially for youth become a training ground of healthy competition and physical improvement, a school of formation in the human and spiritual values, a privileged means for personal growth and contact with society.” In a speech given to Catholic educational leaders, he seeks to ensure that the human values of sport are not neglected: “As part of a coordinated, formative effort, Catholic directors, staff and workers must consider themselves expert guides for youth, helping each of them to develop their athletic potential without obscuring those human qualities and Christian virtues that make for a fully mature person.” Pope Francis, in a similar vein, appeals to the core values of sport and then compels his audience to live according to these, becoming role models for their fans.

The sporting speeches of Pius XII’s offer a contrasting approach to how he engages religion in sport. This stems from the fact that his listeners were Catholic, or at least assumed to be so. His pronouncements are directed at practicing Catholics who participate in sport. Themes and discussion points touch on a variety of themes that could reach out to a broader audience, but on the whole his intended audience is his flock whom he tries to shepherd. In his statement of principles governing sporting activity, for instance, he calls upon Catholics to care appropriately for their bodies, use sport as a means to renew their wills, and maintain proper balance among sport, family, and religious duties (42-43). Thus, Pope Pius’ approach to religion for sporting situations is a mix of an emphasis on a communal ethos and a strong concern for individual salvation. Post-Vatican II popes, reflecting the desires of the council, speak to a larger cultural or global concern and thus give priority to a shared religious ethos in sporting endeavors. Their openness to culture, however, does not translate into an embrace of modern sport culture.

Critical of Culture

Papal views regarding the sporting culture and the influential role of the wider culture in general is consistently critical—despite highlighting sports’ intrinsic worth. They offer a similar approach like Hughes and Kingsley did in 19th century England, except that the pontiffs seek to uphold these higher ideals of the past (and the future) for the dignity and holistic formation of all persons.

Pope John Paul⁴—a sports enthusiast himself—did not naively embrace all elements of sport as a means to evangelism. In an address to a conference on sports, faith and ethics, he critiqued the motives of profit in sports’ businesses and warned against raising sport “to the status of a vain and dangerous idol” (38). At another similar conference, he cautioned athletes not to let themselves “be carried away by an obsession with physical perfection, or be enslaved by the rigid laws of production and consumption, or by purely utilitarian and hedonistic considerations” (56). Elsewhere he offers the same critique and uses it as a call to athletes to train their spirits as well as their bodies: “You are true athletes when you . . . constantly engag[e] the spiritual dimensions of your person for a harmonious development of all your human talents” (36). The harmony between body and spirit is an alternative approach consistently endorsed by Pope Benedict. To a group of Italian ski instructors, he states:

Through sports, a person understands better that his body cannot be considered an object; rather, through corporeity, he expresses himself and enters into relationships with others. In this way, the balance between the physical and spiritual dimensions does not bring us to idolize the body, but rather to respect it and not to let it become an instrument to be strengthened at all costs, possibly even by resorting to illegal methods.

Whereas Pope Pius XII places the spirit wholly in charge of the body (50-52), Benedict XVI emphasizes the balance between the two and even goes as far to underline how the body can be a means for entering appropriately into relationships. In an address to the Austrian national ski team, he underlines this harmony for the good of the competitor and sport:

Body, spirit and soul form a single unity and each component must be in harmony with the other. You know how necessary this interior harmony is in order to reach sporting goals at the highest levels. Consequently, even the most demanding sports must be rooted in a holistic view of the human person, recognizing his profound dignity and favouring an overall development and full maturity of the person. Otherwise, if sport is only focused on mere material performance, it will fall short of realizing its necessary social dimension.

It is concern with an emphasis on material goods and wealth that sets the tone in Pope Francis’ speech. He recognizes that “soccer, as some other disciplines, has become big

⁴ The ordering of each of the sections reveals the significance of the teaching of John Paul II. His love of sport and numerous meetings with sporting figures—positively influenced by the length of his reign—translate into a set of core teachings linked to the tradition thought (e.g., Pius XII) yet shows signs of renewal following the teaching of Vatican II.

business!” He accepts this social reality, yet nonetheless calls upon professional athletes promote an attitude of “dilettante” so that sport “won’t lose its sports character.”

The critique of sport that arises in nearly all of the papal speeches highlights the need to correct serious moral problems in sport. The pontiffs are especially concerned with the education (either explicitly or implicitly) being offered to young people through sport. They underscore the need to revise the aims of sport so as to correlate with its intrinsic value and its capacity to serve the needs of human persons (instead of humans serving the needs of sports).

Conclusions and Areas for Discussion in Boston

Overall, the most encouraging feature of the speeches is their desire to challenge a narrow secularism guiding sports. The popes call upon educators in the sports field to upset a purely non-religious or unspiritual approach to sporting pursuits. Like others, the pontiffs present a type of “call to arms” based upon strongly religious, social activist approach to sport. They reflect a response to another recent pope—Paul VI—who saw the split between faith and culture as the most tragic of his day. Questions abound: Can religion re-enter the sporting realm? What role can it have locally or globally? What are the dangers of such attempts—either to sports or religions?

The papal desire for an engagement between sport and the Christian faith would seem to necessarily include (and would seriously benefit from) the work of religious educators. Pope John Paul speaks hopefully of future athletic competition as being “a school of religious education” (37); Pope Benedict calls it “a school of religious education, or rather the education of man in his totality, a privileged means for personal growth and contact with society.” What role could religious educators perform in a variety of settings—schools, parishes, community leagues, recreational centers, etc.?

Other issues for consideration:

- To begin, the biggest problem faced by this type of work for religious educators is its credibility. For instance, studies in sport and religion are in their infancy. Sport, furthermore, is rarely considered in discussions of theology or religious studies. Is it a road worthy of travel for religious educators?
- Given the shared religious ethos that is highlighted by the latter popes, how can interfaith efforts assist religious educators in designing an approach for common religious values in sport?
- In what ways can the writings and thought of other religious educators develop a religious education through sport?
- In terms of Christian ministry, sport chaplaincy is something worthy of consideration. People have spiritual experiences or learn significant life lessons on the court or pitch. Chaplains could engage (young) people in their experiences and offer assistance. Is this viable?
- It is generally accepted that parents are the primary educators of their children. Do we take seriously their educational role in sports as coaches, referees, and spectators?

Beyond the papal speeches, further clarity of thought is required to assist the work of religious educators. Papal teaching walks a fine line between endorsement of the value of play in sport and the capacity of elite competition to spur excellence. Overall, the speeches try to be all things to all people. Specifically making distinctions between elite and amateur sport--along with the difference between sport for adults and youth--would assist educators in creating programs that could endorse the intrinsic value of sport both locally and globally. There is also a tension in the papal speeches regarding their approach to religion. Usually a common religious ethos is highlighted, yet John Paul II in particular often ends speeches with an evangelistic call to athletes. How does this play out in actual sporting settings? When does one shift from human values to specific Christian values? Does this leaning toward explicit evangelization mean that sport should be used as a means to catechesis or conversion--challenging the intrinsic value of sport?