

# Competitive Sports - Spiritually Healthy or Not?

written by Tim Jennings, M.D. | November 12, 2010



*I would like Dr J to discuss competitive sports and whether this is healthy for psychological/spiritual growth. The more I learn about the two conflicting powers (selfless love vs. survival of the fittest) seems competitive sports would not be spiritually healthy. Seems like winning would tempt one to be proud while losing would be damaging to self esteem.*

*I'm pretty sure EGW has spoken on this issue but can't really find anything in her writings. Back in my SDA academy days, we did have some structured sports within the school, but it seems now many SDA academies are very "organized" openly competitive with surrounding schools.....track, soccer, volleyball, basketball, etc. Even our local church has an organized, competitive youth team and promotes it strongly as spiritually healthy?*

*Just wanted some insight on this.....Thanks!*

---

You have hit on a very significant, yet often overlooked issue. From a Christian perspective mankind was created in God's image with other-centered, self-sacrificing, love as the prime motivator for all actions. Love for God and love for others was the ever present desire of the heart when God created mankind in Eden. However, when Adam sinned things changed. Sin is a principle antagonistic to love, a principle of selfishness, taking, exploiting, self-promoting. Sin is about "me" first.

Lucifer's rebellion began when he sought to exalt himself and enthrone himself as most exalted in heaven (Isa 14, Ez 28). Selfishness is a violation of the very construction protocols for the way God designed life to function. Love, giving, beneficence, brings health and happiness, whereas selfishness brings fear, isolation and suffering and death. Imagine, rather than giving away carbon dioxide you instead put a plastic bag over your head to hoard it, such behavior violates the design for life and results in suffering and death to you.

This is the outcome of all selfishness. The problem in the world today is that selfishness is so deeply wired into our system that scientists and many professed Christians purport this drive to survive is "natural" or "normal." But the reality is the "survival of the fittest" instinct is Satan's selfish infection of God's creation which causes all nature to suffer (Romans 8:22).

God's plan of salvation involves transforming our hearts away from fear and selfishness to operate again in harmony with His kingdom of love, where we love God and others more than self. As we grow in relationship with Him, as we understand and value His kingdom more and more, we slowly become like Him and seek to uplift others. We surrender our need to protect self in a trust relationship with Him. That is why the Bible describes those who are ready to meet Jesus when He comes as "these are they who do not love their life so much as to shrink from death" (Rev 12:11). In other words, they don't seek to protect their own lives anymore; the survival of the fittest principle has been replaced with love for God and others. Perfect love has cast out fear and need to protect self (1John 4:18).

Understanding these principles we can evaluate life's activities and inquire - "Does a particular activity promote God's kingdom of love or Satan's kingdom of selfishness?" God's kingdom of selflessness is characterized by sacrificing self to uplift others whereas Satan's kingdom is characterized by dominating others in order to aggrandize or promote self.

In competitive sports what is the dynamic at work? Is it not one individual or group working, within the confines of the game, to "destroy" "dominate" "overcome" "defeat" the opponent? What attitudes do you see manifested by fans of various sport teams toward their opponents? Is it usually kindness, grace, acceptance, love or rather hostility, enmity, verbal and sometimes physical abuse?

In your own experience, what emotions do such activities arouse; greater desire to help others or greater desire to dominate others? When your team is losing what does that do to you? To the degree that competitive sports strengthen selfish desires they work against God's design for human happiness.

You mentioned Ellen G. White, one of the founders of the SDA church. I did a little research and discovered she did comment on this subject. Here is one of her comments:

Vigorous exercise the pupils must have. Few evils are more to be dreaded than indolence and aimlessness. Yet the tendency of most athletic sports is a subject of anxious thought to those who have at heart the well-being of the youth. Teachers are troubled as they consider the influence of these sports both on the student's progress in school and on his success in afterlife. The games that occupy so much of his time are diverting the mind from study. They are not helping to

prepare the youth for practical, earnest work in life. Their influence does not tend toward refinement, generosity, or real manliness.

Some of the most popular amusements, such as football and boxing, have become schools of brutality. They are developing the same characteristics as did the games of ancient Rome. The love of domination, the pride in mere brute force, the reckless disregard of life, are exerting upon the youth a power to demoralize that is appalling.

Other athletic games, though not so brutalizing, are scarcely less objectionable because of the excess to which they are carried. They stimulate the love of pleasure and excitement, thus fostering a distaste for useful labor, a disposition to shun practical duties and responsibilities. They tend to destroy a relish for life's sober realities and its tranquil enjoyments. Thus the door is opened to dissipation and lawlessness with their terrible results. — Adventist Home, pg 500.

Now with all of this being said, does that mean there is no place for competitive sports or that competitive sports provide only negative influences? To be fair, competitive sports can teach some very helpful principles, team work, self discipline, strategic thinking, cooperation, sportsmanship, compassion, community involvement, healthy living, benefits of exercise, and even selflessness for the good of the team. I know many individuals who have participated in competitive sports and have gained such benefits, however, I also know of others who have become obsessed with winning and developed very self-centered and arrogant characters often enhanced by their athletic success.

What is the balance? The heart motivation of the individuals involved. When an activity becomes the object of one's heart it becomes an idol, whether for the athlete playing the sport or the fan watching. When such idealization occurs one begins to value the sport and success at the sport as a supreme objective and will seek to win at all cost. This often results in destruction of character.

The April 14, 1997 issue of Sports Illustrated Magazine published the results of a poll conducted of 198 Olympic athletes – sprinters, swimmers, power-lifters and others. They answered two questions:

1. You are offered a banned performance-enhancing substance with 2 guarantees: You will not be caught and you will win your competition. Would you take it? 195 said yes, only 3 said no.
2. You are offered a banned performance-enhancing substance with 3 guarantees: You will not be caught; you will win every competition you enter for the next five years and; you will die from the side effects. Would you take it? More than half said yes!

When competitive sports extinguish love, fair play, honor, and a compassionate regard for others, then such activities are opposed to God's kingdom regardless how much money or earthly prestige one achieves. But as long as one keeps love for God first and love for others second, sports can teach some very good lessons – the question – can we keep a healthy balance?