

BOOK REVIEWS

GOOD GAME: CHRISTIANITY AND THE CULTURE OF SPORTS By Shirl J. Hoffman, Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010, 356 pp. \$24.95 paperback.

What if sports were different? If we somehow managed to eliminate the violence, hyper-masculinity, avarice, sensuality, disdain for opposing players, and win-at-all-costs mentality from our athletic contests, would there be anything left of the sports we so love? Would we still play them? Would we still watch them with such enchanted abandon? In *Good Game: Christianity and the Culture of Sports*, Shirl James Hoffman helps us – and by *us* I mean people of faith – ask and answer important questions about the spiritual nature of sports, the space they occupy in our lives, and the emotions they raise in us. To borrow the name of a well-known toy store: Sports-R-Us. They reflect our deepest longings and our inner natures – and if you believe Hoffman, that's not all good news. Professor Emeritus of Exercise and Sport Science at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, and the Executive Director of the American Kinesiology Association, Hoffman is well qualified to write this book. The breadth of his knowledge of the history of sport, especially in its relationship to religion, and his keen insights into what it might mean to think Christianly about sports contribute to a readable and impassioned plea for more careful and more spiritual reflection about what sports have come to mean for us and our world. Are "touchdowns for Jesus" and vague beliefs that sports build character enough? What Would Jesus Do? According to Hoffman, probably not watch the NFL.

Good Game is an invigorating lament which details the ever-widening gulf between many of our sports and the ways of the humble, non-violent, turn-the-other-cheek-and-die-for-your-enemies Jesus to whom touchdowns are frequently dedicated. Throughout the book Hoffman refers to the evangelical sport culture as "Sportianity," a somewhat derisive term that reflects the religious impulse within sport. Hoffman believes the deeply entrenched ideologies and mythic metanarratives animating sport – in religious and nonreligious communities alike – will be hard to change. Near the end of the book he writes,

This religion of sport embraces a host of ideologies such as an unquestioned belief in the character-enhancing properties of sport, belief in the inherent goodness of mass consumerism, and faith in competitiveness and confrontation as keys to personal growth. Its "cultic

acts” are evident in the tribalism of tailgating, the nods to patriotism inserted into the pageantry of Saturday afternoon football games, the utterance of non-sectarian prayers to a civil god who presumably helps both teams win simultaneously, and militarism transported to the field in the name of school spirit.

This book is a sober challenge to our collective souls – we can heed it, or grab another Bud Light.

One reason *Good Game* is so compelling is that it brings to consciousness deeply entrenched parts of our cultural life that go mostly unexamined. For example, while we may, in our more pious moments, mute or even turn off highly sexualized commercials during the Super bowl – shielding our children – it rarely occurs to us that there are deep contradictions between the game of football itself and the teachings of scripture we hold up as the rule of faith and life. What does it mean to turn from sexual content, but revel when an opposing player is sacked, crushed, or given a career-ending head injury? Hoffman points out that that’s just part of the game for us – enjoyed between chicken wings. After all, doesn’t the player have a choice? But do we pause to consider what the scriptures say about the love of violence – let alone violence as entertainment? Examples of sports related violence abound in this book, and Christian faith seems to have little moderating influence on it. You will read about a police officer paying a pitcher \$2 to hit a 10-year-old with a fastball, an account of a youth minister who kicked a young male teen in the groin for poor performance in the kingdom building activity of competitive dodge ball, and testimonies from Hoffman’s colleagues who lament that “some of the worst displays of sportsmanship they have witnessed were in games between Christian colleges or in church-league softball and basketball games.”

In one chapter titled, “Christians and the Killer Instinct,” Hoffman explains the power of the social context in compelling certain modes of action. In football, and other sports, we learn to see others as objects to be overcome, and we learn to focus attention on our own perceived greatness. He quotes sport psychologist Bruce Ogilvie who “reported that almost every truly great athlete he had interviewed ‘consistently emphasized that in order to be a winner you must retain the killer instinct.’” For most athletes this means they must rid themselves of sympathies for their opponents. Hoffman offers myriad examples of how coaches try to eliminate sympathy and nurture the killer instinct. These tactics range from developing anger aimed at greater explosiveness on the starting line to having players chase animals around practice fields, eventually stomping them to death. In one story, Hoffman explains how an Arizona State University coach “publicly worried” that a pre-Fiesta Bowl steak fry with opposing players would soften his team’s resolve. “How can you have them go

out and do battle when they've just shared a meal with some pretty nice guys?" Explaining these and similar tactics, Hoffman employs the concept of *social distancing* which is universally seen as a "fundamental requirement for competitive success." On the one hand, social distancing is necessary in competitive environments – no one willingly hands a ball to the opposing team. On the other, it creates animosity between teams, and players are typically less friendly and collegial at the end of a game than before. This is at odds with teachings long central to the Christian faith, and ways of life which promote the other as enemy, not neighbor, put us on shaky moral footing, even when for the sake of so-called fun. Hoffman concludes, "Acts of dubious morality are hardly cleansed of their obliquity when perpetrated as part of a mutual agreement entered into for purposes of entertainment."

Good Game is not just about decrying violence and other morally suspect parts of the sport culture. It also helps the reader understand how various theologies and developments in Christianity shaped sports and influenced Christian involvement in them. Tracing the church's relationship to sports from the first three centuries of its existence and moving to the influence of the Reformers, Puritans, the Social Gospel movement, and contemporary sports evangelism, Hoffman skillfully weaves a narrative showing how the church responded (and sometimes capitulated) to various social pressures. Luther, for example, held a defensive position on sports. He tolerated them, seeing them as cathartic and distracting. "'The ultimate objective of sports,' said Luther, 'is to keep us from lapsing into other activities – drinking, wenching, gambling – as we can already see happening (for shame!) in our courts and cities.'" Calvin taught that Christians could, "enjoy the pleasures of the present world, providing no offense was brought to weaker believers and acts were done with a clear Christian conscience for the purpose of bringing glory to God." John Knox even claimed to have seen Calvin bowling on Sunday afternoons! Imagine the scandal. However, the English Puritans, Hoffman tells us, raised work to the status of a core moral value, and positioned play and other idle pursuits on the opposite end of the moral spectrum. It is easy to see how the Puritan economy, for which work was functional, and idleness a threat, heavily influenced the religious norms of the era. Sin and guilt became associated with sport. Hoffman provides a humorous account of Puritan writer John Bunyan, who after playing a game resembling baseball, had the sinfulness of his deed revealed to him in a Damascus road-like experience. But after repenting, to his dismay, he lapsed into it again. (Not bad for a besetting sin!) Later, the Social Gospel movement revitalized the Christian impulse toward play, and emphasized – with self-serving twists – Paul's teaching on Christian liberty. By the time we reach the

present day, Christian involvement with sports has mostly been reduced, in Hoffman's thinking, to "add Jesus and stir."

Some of Hoffman's most pointed critique is leveled at those who pair sports with evangelism, but refuse to acknowledge or promote serious structural and cultural change in our national pastimes. The lack of concern for the human body seen in many of our sports – including those played by children – is a big issue for Hoffman. "In the evangelical sporting mind, God desires sexually pure, unstained, and undrugged bodies but apparently isn't all that concerned that they remain physically intact." For Hoffman, sarcasm aside, this theological lapse is a very serious matter, and underscores his contention that of those who practice Sportianity seem willing to follow God unless it requires modifying sports. Likewise, Hoffman sees fingers pointed toward God and prayer in the end-zone as empty and showy when not accompanied with a concern for changing the violence, pride, love of money, and hatred of enemies nurtured within the culture of the game.

This book will be painful for some. It's certainly not a manifesto for sports fans. One of my more sports-minded colleagues raised a hand when I read him one of Hoffman's more scathing attacks on football, and pleaded, "Just don't tell me." But we need to hear it. And so, read this book, not as a fan, but as a person of faith. Sports are a good part of God's creation – and they really can provide challenge and inspiration. But as we play and as we watch, we must ask ourselves what it means to so covet winning as we struggle to conform to the ways of Jesus who calls us to die to self, and to consider the needs of others first. What counter-narrative might we offer to the sports community of the dominant culture? And, as Hoffman challenges, "Despite what the traditions of sport may tell us, what is truly highest and finest about God's people is not their capacity to sacrifice and work hard in order to bask in the rewards of long-coveted goals but their capacity, when the right moment comes, to give up those rewards willingly in order to do the right thing." Read it for yourself, but I think Hoffman's hit a home run.

Matthew S. Vos, Covenant College