THIS SPORTING LIFE

By DAVID LONSDALE

IN MY LAST THREE YEARS as a high-school student I played soccer in the winter and cricket in the summer for the school's Second Eleven. We took part in those games, which were held in our free time, voluntarily and for the pleasure of playing. We were not part of any league or knock-out competition, but we played to win, for the satisfaction of beating rival schools in the sports arena and in the simple hope of chalking up as many victories as possible in the course of a season. The games were at one and the same time totally serious and yet played in a light-hearted spirit. We wanted to win, but the school's reputation as a seedbed of sporting excellence did not depend on the fortunes of its Second Eleven! While the game lasted and for a short time afterwards, the question of victory or defeat was a serious matter and there was always a vigorous *post mortem*. But by Monday of the following week we were already looking forward to the next Saturday's game. Within the team there was co-operation, mutual support and companionship: during the games themselves, we forgot our personal hostilities and put our individual gifts at the service of the corporate effort. Anyone who seemed to be playing for himself or by himself was quickly subjected to the direct, spontaneous criticism that adolescent males who know each other well hand out to each other! But most of all, we played because we wanted to and because we enjoyed it immensely. In retrospect that looks very like an experience of sport as 'play', which Johan Huizinga described as:

> a free activity, standing quite consciously outside 'ordinary' life as being 'not serious', but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly . . . an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner.[1]

Sport as commodity and entertainment

Sport today in the northern hemisphere is in the hands of the money-makers and the media and entertainment industries (and to a lesser extent the politicians). The commercialization of sport and its

takeover by the mass entertainment industry dictate the relationship between ends and means, with the result that the original play spirit seems almost extinct. All too often the primary end is that the sponsors of sporting events and the media industry should make money and lots of it; the more the better. Almost everything else, including athletes and players, are used with varying degrees of ruthlessness to serve that end.

Nonetheless, the commercialization of sport and its development as a commodity for the consumer has had some positive consequences. The range and variety of sports on offer, for example, has greatly increased. Whereas sport was once the preserve of a wealthy élite, people from a far wider range of social groupings now have access to it, with the result that larger numbers of people, including those who are relatively poor, can benefit from taking part. They can enjoy, for example, the opportunity for greater physical health and fitness; a context for the exercise of skills, for self-discovery and self-expression in forms that combine excitement, grace and artistry; creative use of leisure; opportunities for 'sheer play' as a balance to the struggle to make ends meet or the pressures of the workplace, and finally the companionship and social recognition that comes about through playing.

Besides these benefits, commercialization has also greatly increased the range of entertainment open to vast numbers of the world's population through media coverage of sporting events. And with this, clubs, teams and associations in all kinds of sport have proliferated, to create new social bonds and wider opportunities for people to share their skills in a common pursuit. Commercial sponsorship and media coverage of sport have also fostered social mobility for some of the world's poor people. Many outstanding Latin American soccer players, for example, were shanty-town children. Commercialized sport also has the potential for bringing lasting economic and structural benefits not only to isolated individuals but also to more needy countries and cities that play host to events such as the World Cup or the Olympic Games. The opportunities for improvements in employment, housing, roads and infrastructure which these events bring can, at least in theory, benefit local people, especially those most in need.

There is an ambiguity about these benefits, however, and it would be a mistake to claim that the results of the commercialization of sport and its exploitation by the media are all positive. The individual and social advantages that I have listed here do not in fact always

materialize. And alongside these, the present state of sport encourages a number of negative values. Commercialization and the exploitation of sport as a commodity have placed an almost exclusive emphasis on performance, winning, being first. Performance is all: winning is a money-spinner for the commercial backers, and the media and the television viewers are far more interested in winners than in runners-up. National pride and prestige are also often bound up with performance in the world's arenas. This preoccupation with performance and success gives rise to extraordinary scenes such as athletes devastated because they have won 'only' a silver medal in the Olympic Games!

Today's commercial and media domination of sport leads all too often to the exploitation of human beings and their gifts for the sake of making money. Players are bought and sold for enormous sums: during a recent soccer match between Barcelona and the Italian club Juventus, the combined cost of individual players in the two teams amounted to sixty million pounds. Advertising firms and the media use the personalities, bodies and talents of winning athletes and sports players as saleable commodities. And the current publicity about the use of drugs has brought to light a tragic irony. While one of the primary aims of sport is to promote physical and mental health, today's preoccupation with performance leads instead to the abuse of the body by drugs, extreme forms of dieting and high-altitude training. Brilliant players become crippled after a few years because their bodies have received so much cortisone; anorexic gymnasts suffer almost total personal breakdown only a short time after being teenage world champions. And on a worldwide scale, sport sustains and exploits the economic gap between rich and poor nations. Even leisure sport, the Saturday afternoon game of tennis in the local park, is increasingly subject—for children as well as for adults—to exploitation in the name of performance, efficiency and fashions in clothing and equipment.

These are among the negative values which represent the dark side of present-day sport. Except on the question of drugs, few voices are raised in protest at the exploitation and few attempts are made to offer alternative structures which might mend the injustices.[2]

An original experience of sport?

Sport, then, has been taken over by commercialization, consumerism, the media and in some instances nationalism. In the rest of this article, however, I am going to explore the perhaps surprising notion

that sport can in fact be an apt symbol of what it means to be a Christian. For that we will have to try to recover a more original experience of what sport is and is meant to be, freed as far as possible from the dominance of these other interests. This does not mean, however, that we must turn back the clock to a pseudo Golden Age of *Chariots of fire* in which sport supposedly still had its pristine innocence. What we are looking for, rather, is an understanding of the meaning and place of sport within the context of human and Christian life.

The importance of metaphors

Metaphors play a crucial part in every area of life, and especially in that of talking about God and living in communion with God. Sometimes, however, people speak of 'mere' metaphors or images or about something as being 'merely symbolic', as if they were not important. But metaphors, images and symbols, by which we understand one thing in terms of another, are the basic tools with which we deal with the world, God and ourselves. On the wall in front of me as I write is a print of a Picasso drawing of a woman holding a baby. That is an image by which I am able to understand many things about motherhood, about drawing and about the artist who drew the original. The behaviour of particles and waves is a metaphor by which scientists are able to describe the basic constitution of matter. And in dealing with God, the hidden mystery who surrounds and fills our lives, metaphors and images are essential. Jesus's parables are no more than extended metaphors to express the mystery of God's dealings with us.

If sport is to be a metaphor which helps us to understand and to live the Christian life, we need to rediscover sport as one example of that human activity we call play. Play is a necessity both for individuals and for society; it makes for a balanced and more integrated existence. Proverbs such as 'all work and no play make Jack a dull boy' (and presumably Jill a dull girl) express a wisdom which goes back at least as far as Plato and Aristotle.[3]

Play is not only necessary; it also enhances and enlarges life: it gives us the chance to discover and express ourselves and to find our limits; to move our eyes to horizons broader than the narrow tunnels in which a preoccupation with work, wealth or fame can imprison us. Play is not only a basic characteristic of human culture but also a mirror of human existence. Through playing, we express our interpretation of life and of the world.[4]

Serious playfulness

Sport as play, when not subverted to serve commercial or political ends, combines the serious and the carefree in an unusual way. When I was describing my schooldays at the start of this essay, I noted that we took the games we played extremely seriously and abandoned ourselves to the content while it lasted. And yet we played in a spirit of light-hearted enjoyment as well. Though the home cricket field was a low-lying trapezium between railway embankments rather than the leafy oval of the story books, we extended cricket matches well into the long summer evenings simply because it was so enjoyable to be there and to take part. Any game has a secure framework of accepted rules which can be enforced, as a poet notices, puzzling (as well he might) over the strange phenomenon of a rugby scrum:

> Giants, the epigones of Uranus
> stamp around in the cold, steaming like cattle.
> Their lives are ruled by improbable fictions,
> lines, flags and whistles,
> a thirty-two legged spider that wheels and buckles
> over the agony of its stubborn leather egg.[5]

Within that framework of rules the game is utterly serious to those taking part. Yet at the same time it is 'only a game': a temporary exercise and contest of physical and mental skills in the company of like-minded people.

It is surely not fanciful to see here an image of the Christian life; not because cricket is mocked as an image of a gently tedious eternity, nor because we are in the midst of the 'great game of life watched over by the Eternal Referee'! Just like sport, however, the Christian life combines both seriousness and joy. The foundation of Christian existence is a conviction that God's love for humankind and for each individual is without conditions, unfailing and entirely trustworthy. The passion and death of Jesus in particular demonstrate the seriousness of God's love. At the same time, we are aware of the mystery that the more fully we grasp how serious God's love is, the more carefree, peaceful and joyful we can become. Hugo Rahner wrote of a Christian's 'serene abandonment to the seriousness of God'.[6] Since God's love is without limits or conditions and since 'nothing can come between us and the love of God made visible in Christ Jesus', we hear the sound of laughter in the good news:

> Because of this sight I laughed greatly, and that made those around me to laugh as well; and their laughter was pleasing to me. I thought

> that I wished that all my fellow Christians had seen what I saw. Then they would all have laughed with me . . . for I understood that we may laugh, to comfort ourselves and rejoice in God, because the devil is overcome.[7]

Freedom

A few years ago I had a series of dreams in which taking part in football matches, or being prevented from taking part, was a recurring theme. After some reflection, I concluded that these dreams were not merely the nostalgic longings of a middle-aged, retired footballer. They were saying something important about what sport means to me. In the dreams, taking part in the games was an exhilarating experience of freedom, while being prevented from taking part evoked a wretched feeling of constraint and oppression.

The framework of order in a game allows players to be free in at least two important respects. First, when sport is not dominated by an external power such as the media or commercial interests, the players take part voluntarily; they play if and when they want to do so, and for the sheer enjoyment of the sport itself. And that is a true exercise of personal freedom. But more important than this, a game often allows the participants to have and to express feelings, attitudes, gifts—a true 'self'—which perhaps are not allowed to be or to emerge in everyday life. Teachers often notice that some students appear to be quite different people on the sportsfield and in the classroom.

This too is a spontaneous exercise of personal freedom: the freedom to be and to express more fully, within the context of a game, that which one truly is. And this liberation also occurs on a wider scale than that of the individual person. A fascinating sociological study of the phenomenon of 'futebol' in Brazil[8] suggests that Brazilian soccer fever and the particular Brazilian style of playing the game are expressions of a way of being and of qualities of the whole people in Brazil. This 'other self' is often hidden and not allowed to emerge in prevailing economic and social conditions except on privileged occasions such as a game of 'futebol', which is a symbolic enacting of national, political and social dramas. 'Futebol' encourages freedom by offering a setting in which otherwise hidden dramas and conflicts of the people can come to symbolic but nonetheless real expression.

The parallels between this and the Christian life are interesting! Being secure in God's love frees us and encourages us to grow without fear into the kind of person, the kind of community God

intended us to be. In theory at least, the Christian community supports and fosters this process. We express and celebrate this freedom in liturgy, which is also itself perhaps a form of 'play'. In social and political circumstances that seriously restrict a Christian way of being, the Christian community can offer a setting that positively nourishes qualities of heart, mind and spirit which the prevailing system ignores or actively suppresses, at the same time encouraging them to reach full expression. Perhaps in some circumstances this kind of liberation is part of the Church's prophetic role of offering more human and just alternatives to dominant social and political systems.

Wholeness

It is well known that retired sports players are incorrigibly given to reminiscence about their golden moments. In keeping with this tradition, then, let me mention, though only briefly, a moment of my own: a goal which I scored and which I still recall very vividly (possibly because such events were so scarce in my career!) It took up only a few seconds of a bright winter's afternoon in Oxford when, for a short, exhilarating moment, I experienced perfect harmony of eyes, feet, body, mind and spirit. I received the ball at my feet forty yards from goal, moved forward ten paces, effortlessly side-stepping in turn two opposing players who converged on me, and shot for goal. For once, my timing and co-ordination were faultless and the ball soared unstoppably into the goal, while the goalkeeper looked on, helpless. (I can also remember playing a few—a very few—cricket shots of a similar quality, but I'll tell you about those some other time.)

Sport offers to those who have the needful skill, training and discipline not just these peak moments but a continuing experience of creative harmony with oneself, a kind of 'wholeness', while the game lasts, in which body, mind and spirit act in unison to produce something which has its own beauty and splendour. Here also, therefore, sport is an image of Christian living. We are drawn into Christian discipleship with the hope that, through prayer and the discipline of carefully paying heed to the Spirit of God, we may come eventually to a greater wholeness, in which all the dimensions of the person blend together in harmony in the service of the reign of God. We often think and speak of prayer and of our relationships with God in terms of work. In that we are following in the tradition of such classics as *The cloud of unknowing*, which speaks of this 'work' of contemplation, and stresses the difficulty and labour of it. And yet

the image of the Spirit blowing where it wills suggests play rather than work.

So perhaps praying and playing are really more like each other than we usually imagine them to be. The focus of attention in each is different, of course. In sport a player's mental and physical powers are united to perform creative physical actions, while contemplative prayer on the other hand integrates the whole person around the 'spiritual' activity of attending to God. Nonetheless, both sport as play and contemplative prayer contain that mysterious combination of serious playfulness that I have already described. Prayer also has its special moments of harmony in which all our often conflicting desires and attractions, indeed every part of us, seems integrated, whole and at peace in the presence of God. In utilitarian terms, too, both prayer and play are a waste of time, since we engage in them for what they are in themselves rather than for the sake of anything beyond them. Both of them, moreover, offer a context in which an individual, in harmony with others, can discover and express in freedom that true self that often lies hidden beneath everyday masks. And finally each of them is in its own way a form of celebration, in which we glory with gratitude in body and spirit in the gifts God has given to us and share those gifts with others. Perhaps as a general rule our prayer, both personal and liturgical, is still too much confined and oppressed by metaphors of work and longs to be set free by images of play. And perhaps play comes closer than work to expressing the full reality of our relationship with God.

In the middle of this century Hugo Rahner and Johan Huizinga, among others, saw play as embodying important dimensions of what it means to be truly human and truly Christian, and they rightly presented this as a necessary corrective to the materialistic utilitarianism of the time. Sport as play is a serious fooling, a joyous, free and creative use of God's gifts; as such it is very apt as a metaphor for the Christian life. At the heart of the Christian gospel, however, there is another element, an element of *kenosis*, of being centred on others rather than on oneself, of *agape* rather than *eros*. This finds expression in the gospels in terms of the grain of wheat that falls in the ground and dies, finding one's life by losing it, and ultimately in the events on Calvary. An outstanding feature of the life of Jesus is a love that seemed to move him spontaneously towards others in compassion and forgetfulness of self, no matter who those others might be. This kind of love is a gift of God which most of us are able to receive only very gradually. The gospel suggests that we find ourselves by trusting

in the love of God and, resting on that, joyfully sharing ourselves with others, giving ourselves away.

My last question for this article then, is whether sport, as an image of the Christian life, offers any parallel to this mystery of self-forgetful love. In my experience, sport as play, and indeed play of any kind, even when free of commercial and media domination, can be centred quite firmly on self for those who take part in it. It is part of a search for self-fulfilment in body, mind and spirit. And that, insofar as it holds good, is a limitation of sports as an image of the Christian life.

But there is more to be said. Except in the topmost ranks of international sport, every team is a combination of the stars who score the goals, the tries, the points, the runs in their thousands and, on the other hand, the players whose skills and efforts are more humdrum and do not make the headlines. I have never been a star, but I imagine it is very difficult for them not to look for their own personal glory. And yet without the more mundane contribution of the more ordinary players, the stars could not shine. The gifts of the others in the team are less obvious, more hidden; they do not look for their own glory but rejoice 'in the presence of the bridegroom' and in the success of the whole team.

Connoisseurs of cricket will recognize that it is a game which combines individual brilliance and supportive skills in a particularly striking way. While there are obviously players who specialize in batting, the success of the team depends also on the ability of everyone to bat. And no matter how brilliant bowlers may be at their special trade, they are nothing without the support of the more humble skills and safe hands of good fielders, for 'catches win matches'.

Perhaps it is not too fanciful, then, to say that in this respect also sport is an image of a good life, human and Christian. It mirrors, albeit in a small way, that mystery of sharing of oneself with others that lies at the heart of the Christian gospel. Every team carries players who know that their main contribution is to support others for the sake of the whole side. They know that the headline-makers depend upon them, could not be brilliant without the support of their efforts. They know both the strength and the limits of their humbler gifts, and they gladly place them at the service of the team as a whole. In this way they too offer a pale, perhaps, but nonetheless real image of that large-hearted, self-forgetful love that Jesus both talked about and lived.

NOTES

[1] Huizinga, Johan: *Homo ludens: a study of the play element in culture* (Paladin, London, 1970), p 32.
[2] Dietmar Mieth summarizes the ethical questions in 'The ethics of sport' in *Concilium* no 205, edited by Gregory Baum and John Coleman (T and T Clark, Edinburgh, 1989), pp 79–92.
[3] See Hugo Rahner: *Man at play, or did you ever practise eutrapelia?* (London, Burns and Oates, 1964), pp 26ff.
[4] Huizinga, *op. cit.*, p 66.
[5] From 'Big ideas with loose connections', by Christopher Reid.
[6] Rahner, *op cit.*, p 105.
[7] Julian of Norwich: *Showings*, ch 13 (long text).
[8] See Roberto DaMatta: 'Sports in society: *futebol* as national drama', in *Concilium, ibid.*, pp 57–68.