Olympic-Sized “I Infections”

Feb. 11, 2014

As the 2014 Olympics continue to unfold, televised by the NBC sports team, anchorman Bob Costa’s very public battle with a nasty eye infection continues to be as hot a topic of conversation as which Americans are winning medals. Now both eyes are red, swollen, and painful-looking. As they say here in Texas, bless his heart!

If the spiritual dimension of life were made visible in the physical realm, most of us would be walking around looking like Bob Costa. His eyeball is inflamed and infected, interfering with his vision and affecting the way people see him. It’s a startling picture of our warped and diseased perception through which we experience life. No one is immune, since all of us have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23), and all of us live in a fallen world. We all have a spiritual eye infection.

It’s really an “I infection.”

We’re stupidly, pathologically self-centered and self-absorbed. Our life theme song is “It’s All About MEEEEEEEE!” Everything and everyone is evaluated in terms of how it benefits us or costs us. Adding insult to injury, this “I infection” is not only ugly, but it stinks to high heaven. Some people’s “I infection” comes from a vaunted sense of entitlement. They were showered with excessive parental adoration, believing that every successful trip to the bathroom deserved a round of applause, that they were owed a celebratory party and gifts for turning another year older, that they should receive a trophy for showing up to games.

Others’ “I infection” comes from the desperate fear that at their core, they really don’t matter and there’s nothing there anyway. They are plagued by a shame that colors all of life in

the kind of emotional gunk that blurs Bob Costa's eyes. Everything feels sticky and painful and gross. It just hurts to live.

Still others experience an "I infection" fueled by unhealed wounds that continue to fester and cause pain. It's like walking around with an arrow stuck in your heart, and it doesn't take much for life experiences to brush up against the arrow and cause a fresh wave of pain to an old wound. So they live life in a defensive mode, trying to protect themselves from the relentless presence of unfinished, undealt-with pain.

No matter what the cause of our "I infection," the cure is the same: we need to come to Jesus, in the humility of abject need and dependence on Him. The "I infection" of selfishness is the symptom of a heart that God calls deceitful above all things and desperately wicked (Jer. 17:9). This kind of heart is incurably diseased-we need a heart transplant. Fortunately, God's really good at that. He promises in Ezekiel 36:26 to give us a new heart and put a new spirit in us, which He does the moment we trust in Jesus to save us from our sins and our sin-diseased hearts.

When the person with a sense of entitlement develops an attitude of gratitude, disciplining herself to give thanks for the abundant showering of blessings and gifts from Jesus, her now-thankful heart clears up the ugly "I infection."

When a person infected with shame comes to Jesus, His loving acceptance and grace heals the "I infection" and allows him to see himself as beloved and valuable.

When the ones with unhealed wounds come to Jesus, giving Him access to the places of the heart that hurt and ooze, He pours His love into the wounds as they are exposed to the light by telling their story and then forgiving the ones who caused the wounds. Jesus heals their "I infection" through grieving and forgiving.

Bob Costa may have an eye infection. What's your "I infection" that you need to take to Jesus?

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blogs.bible.org/tapestry/sue_bohlin/oiympic-sized_i_infections

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China, The Olympics and Christians

When the 2008 Olympics were awarded to China back in 2001, there was a naive hope that this decision would change China and also lead to an improvement in human rights. It turns out that instead of changing China, it may have changed us.

One example of this can be seen in our country. When the Olympic torch was carried through various cities in the world, it was protected not only by the local authorities but also by the Chinese secret police. So when the torch came to San Francisco, once again the Chinese secret police showed up. Now to be fair, the news reports actually said that they were volunteers from the Special Forces academy of the Peoples Armed Police. But a better description for them would be Chinas secret police.

This organization has been used to protect embassies in Beijing. But it has also been called upon put down protests in Tibet and suppress protests and other forms of expression in China. They were described by the chairman of the 2012 London Olympic committee as thugs. Others described their tactics as aggressive.

It is amazing to me that we allowed these secret police in our

country, but it illustrates my point. We thought that these trade overtures and the Olympics would change China. In the long run, they may have a positive impact. But so far it seems like we are the ones who have changed.

There was also the naive hope that bringing the Olympics to China would usher in an era of improved human rights in this communist country. It appears that in some ways the situation is worse. China has invested time and money in preparing for the Olympics. It appears they have also done all they can to rid the nation of anyone who could be seen as a dissident.

For decades, China has been rounding up Christians and other dissidents. They have been beaten and thrown in jail. Some have been killed. Lord David Alton estimates that each year 8,000 executions take place in China. Those who escape this persecution must live in a society where political and religious opinion is repressed, where journalists are jailed, and where the Internet and overseas broadcasts are censored.

The Chinese constitution promises its citizens that they have freedom of religious belief. But we know better. While there is an official state church, most of the growth (and the perceived potential threat to the government) takes place in the underground churches. As we get closer to the Olympics, the government seems bent on doing more to smash the growing home church movement.

As Christians we should be in prayer about what is taking place in China. But a growing debate has centered on what the U.S. government should do. Some have called for President Bush to boycott the opening ceremonies. They believe this would be a strong statement of our repudiation of the practices of the Chinese government. Others have suggested that President Bush go and use the Olympics as a platform to speak out against the Chinese government.

I see merit in either action. What is unacceptable is the

current policy of silence. The president, his administration, and even corporate sponsors have been silent about what has been going on for decades. Now even the secular world is calling for action because of Chinas policy toward Tibet. It is time for all of us (Christians included) to break our silence and speak out.

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Athlete Ranks New Life Greater Than Olympic Gold

Suppose you had a chance to win a medal at the Athens Olympics. Could anything make you turn it down?

Olympic success can bring fame, lifetime honor and lucrative endorsement contracts. Olympic games usually bring many inspiring stories of victory through determination and achievement despite adversity. Stars are born and careers receive quantum boosts.

Consider British hurdler Tasha Danvers-Smith. She has been ranked sixth in the world in her event. Her Olympic prospects looked bright.

But her ticket to the Athens track was never punched. It wasn’t injury or defeat that kept her from competing in the games. It was her personal choice.

Tasha Danvers married her coach, Darrell Smith, in November 2003. In early 2004, she was in excellent physical shape and keenly focused on her training. Then, as she told the

Telegraph newspaper, she felt tired all the time, feeling flat for no reason.

In the spring, a home pregnancy test showed positive and she learned she was nine weeks pregnant. “I was in shock, reports Danvers-Smith. I only took the test because I wanted to stop myself worrying about it. Not for one minute did I think it would be positive. The couple had not planned to start a family until after the Olympics.

Having a baby in December would eliminate her chances of competing in Athens in August. It would increase their expenses and mean lean times. They did not own a home and were living with her husband’s parents. She – through her athletic competition – was the main source of income.

As she put it, When my body is my business, then if my body is not functioning, there is no business.

Feeling devastated, the couple considered an abortion. It would seem a simple solution to an inconvenient problem, a comparatively easy way to eliminate an obstacle to the success and recognition she sought.

The thought [of an abortion] did cross our minds as an option,” recalls Danvers-Smith. But this line from the Scriptures kept coming into my head: ‘For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul?

She tried to convince herself that she should terminate her pregnancy but struggled through her tears with an alternative she could not accept: “For me, the whole wide world was the Olympics. At the same time, I felt I would be losing my soul. It just wouldn’t fit well. It would be a forced decision . . . something that wasn’t going to make me happy at all.

Aiming now for the 2008 games, she seems happy with her choice and philosophical about her mixed metaphor situation: Life throws you curve balls and you just have to roll with the

punches.”

Abortion is, of course, one of today’s most controversial issues. But regardless of one’s views on this emotionally explosive topic, it seems appropriate to admire the dedication of a woman who wrestled with an agonizing decision and made her choice to bear her child and postpone possible future glory and fortune.

Regardless of what success eventually comes her way, might that choice become Danvers-Smith’s lifetime golden moment?

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The Games We Play

Game-playing and competition can and should be seen as a healthy part of a life that seeks to glorify God in all things.

Games and a Christian Worldview

Ten seconds are left in the game. The Wolves lead by two points. The Bobcats cross midcourt, knowing they must score or they will miss the playoffs. Smith stumbles! Jones grabs the ball and races toward the Wolves’ basket for a lay-up. Smith tackles him like a linebacker! Both of them slide across the floor and run into the wall behind the basket. It looks as if

Jones may be injured! Players from both teams are shouting at each other. The referee has thrown Smith out of the game!

Does this sound like something you may have seen during a high school, college, or professional basketball game? Or perhaps you have read about a similar incident. Actually, such an event took place in my experience. (The names have been changed to protect the guilty.) I was playing for my church team in a church league. I was the one who was tackled.

Does such an incident represent a Christian worldview of games? Surely most of us would answer with an emphatic, "No!" Unfortunately, though, too many Christians approach games with attitudes that appear to leave their Christian convictions out of the picture. Too many of us can tell stories involving Christians and games that don't align with a Christian worldview. Many times I was the one who allowed athletic intensity to overcome moral conviction in the midst of competition, and I have seen many friends do the same. Why? What is it about games that can encourage some of our more ungodly characteristics?

On the other hand, can sports bring out some of our more godly characteristics? Can God be glorified through games? There have been times in my life when the exhilaration and concentration that can accompany games have included thankfulness to God. He gives me joy when I express my thankfulness to Him as I hit or throw a baseball, catch a football, shoot a basketball, volley a tennis ball, or hit a golf ball.

Arthur Holmes has written that "play is all-pervasive. It does not lie just on the fringes of life, as if games were spare parts we don't really need in the main business of the day."(1) If true, such a statement indicates the importance of our subject. It is worthy of our attention. Some even believe play is the defining characteristic of humans. "Nietzsche went so far as to reduce all of life and thought to masks in a

play, taking nothing seriously except the will to power—in effect, the will to win— that all of life is a biologically driven power play."(2) A Christian, of course, does not agree with this perspective, but the Christian does live in a world that tends to agree with Nietzsche's dictum. The "will to power" definitely is translated into "the will to win" for many. Indeed, the phrase is often elaborated to mean "the will to win at all costs." Vince Lombardi, the coach of the Green Bay Packers during their period of NFL domination, is famous for the statement: "Winning isn't the main thing, it's the only thing." But, can the Christian play, win or lose, and not agree that winning is the only thing? If the answer is, "Yes!," the believer must realize that he has accepted a challenge to be Christ's ambassador even on the field of play.

A Brief History of Games

"That was an Olympian effort!" "Those mountains have an Olympic grandeur." Such expressions indicate some of the ways in which ancient games and their impact are part of our consciousness. Games were part of all ancient cultures. For some, games were more sedentary than for others, but a sense of play permeates man's history. The Greeks, who first held the Olympic Games and others that were similar, organized these events approximately 3,500 years ago. All of them were dedicated to certain gods and were integrated with religious ceremonies. The competitors were originally amateurs whose only reward was a wreath or garland. Eventually, though, the rigorous training that was required led to their professional status. They received adulation in their cities, as well as substantial prizes and monetary rewards.(3) As we will see, the New Testament contains metaphors relating to these games and competitors.

When the Romans became the dominant world power, they rejected the Greek emphasis on athletic skill because of the public nakedness of the competitors.(4) Such a response is ironic in

light of the brutal games that soon came into vogue in the empire. Gladiatorial combat to the death, fights with beasts, even naval battles were staged in the arenas. The circus Maximus in Rome, where important chariot races were held, probably held up to 250,000 people. "By A.D. 354 the games claimed 175 days out of the year."(5) Such popularity is indicative of a significant difference between the Greek and Roman attitudes about games. "The Greeks originally organized their games for the competitors, the Romans for the public. One was primarily competition, the other entertainment."(6) The Roman thirst for barbaric spectacle and entertainment ultimately prompted the outrage of early church leaders. They "denounced the games and similar amusements because of idolatry, immodesty, and brutality. It was, in fact, the opposition of Christianity that brought them to an end."(7) Such a response may prove to be appropriate in our time. But for the moment I propose we simply consider what Scripture contains to guide us in an appraisal of the games played by both Christians and non- Christians.

The Old Testament contains few references to games, even though evidence of them can be found in all areas of the ancient Near East. "Simple and natural amusements and exercises, and trials of wit and wisdom, were more to the Hebrew taste."(8) The biblical text does mention children's games, sports such as running, archery, stone-lifting, high leaping, games of chance and skill, story-telling, dancing, the telling of proverbs, and riddles. In addition, wrestling probably was part of Hebrew life.(10)

It is of special interest to note the joyous prophetic picture of Zechariah 8:5: "And the streets of the city will be filled with boys and girls playing in its streets" (NASB). "The promise of the kingdom, as Lewis Smedes observes, is of restored playfulness." Evidently play and games have a place in God's plan for His people:

Scripture begins with life in a garden and ends with a city

> *at play; so play—art and celebration and fun and games, and a playful spirit—is part of our calling, part of the creation mandate. It is not the play of self-indulgence, nor of shed responsibility, but of gladness and celebration in responsible relationship to God."(11)*

Games and the New Testament

Can you picture the Apostle Paul as a sportswriter? Imagine him sitting in a stadium pressbox observing the athletes compete. Then imagine him writing his observations and opinions of what transpired. The next morning you purchase a newspaper and turn to the sports section. There you find an account of the previous day's game under Paul's byline. Does this sound farfetched, out of character, ludicrous? Actually such a scenario is not far removed from Paul's knowledge of the games of his day. In several portions of his letters, one can find metaphors relating to athletic preparation and competition. The same is true for the writer of Hebrews. These New Testament writers evidently were aware of Greek and Roman games and realized they could be used to teach valuable lessons to their readers. Their awareness is evidence that they were enmeshed in the surrounding culture, which was filled with indicators of the importance of games and competition in the ancient world.

These games "were so well known in Palestine and throughout the Roman Empire in the time of Christ and the apostles that they cannot be passed over in silence."(13) Archaeological remains indicate stadiums of various types in many cities including Jerusalem, Jericho, Caesarea, Ephesus, Corinth, Rome, and Tarsus, the city of Paul's early life. "The early Christians, therefore, whether of Jewish or gentile origin, were able to understand, and the latter at any rate to appreciate, references either to the games in general, or to details of their celebration."(14) A brief survey of particular New Testament passages will provide us with a

foundation for an analysis of games in contemporary life.

Some of the most intriguing athletic metaphors in all of Paul's writings are found in 1 Corinthians 9:24-27. He uses Greek terminology and images that stem directly from the athletic contests of his day, especially the triennial Isthmian Games held in Corinth. These terms and images include running a race to win, receiving a prize, competition, discipline in preparation for competition, concentration, abiding by the rules, and even boxing. Variations on these themes can be found in Galatians 2:2 and 5:7; Philippians 2:16 and 3:14; 2 Timothy 2:5 and 4:7. In Hebrews 12:1 the author of Hebrews echoes Paul's metaphors by encouraging Christians to "run with endurance the race that is set before us." In verse 2 he even refers to Jesus as the one who set the pace and has already covered the course.

These passages are worthy of many sermons and extensive commentary. Since that is not possible in this short essay, let's consider a few insights from these biblical metaphors that are most germane to our subject.

First, there is no blanket condemnation of games. The metaphors carry the positive weight of someone who respected athletic endeavors. Second, there is much to learn about the Christian life when we compare it with games. Games can be seen and experienced in ways that correlate with Christian principles such as discipline, concentration, and perseverance. Third, these passages should not be gleaned in an uncritical manner. Surely Paul rejected many aspects of the games, such as the pagan religious emphases. Fourth, the physical body was not rejected as unimportant. Gnosticism, which was a prominent heresy of New Testament times, taught that the body was unimportant or even sinful. In contrast, these verses take the importance of the body for granted. It is God's creation.

Contemporary Views of Games

The Super Bowl. The Final Four. College Bowl Games. The Olympics. The NBA Finals. The World Series. Little League Baseball. The Masters. The World Cup. The list of such sports-related titles could fill several pages of this essay because our culture is saturated with games. This infatuation takes a great deal of our time, attention, and money. An objective observer, in my opinion, would conclude that humans are obsessed with games. Current predictions and opinions of this infatuation vary from the skeptical to the optimistic. Alvin Toffler, writing in 1970, predicted that, "Leisure-time pursuits will become an increasingly important basis for differences between people, as the society shifts from a work orientation toward greater involvement in leisure. We shall advance into an era of breathtaking fun specialism."(15) Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, the great basketball player of the recent past, stated, "Modern sports is getting to be like professional wrestling; something is going awry."(16) According to Robert Higgs, author of *God in the Stadium*, "Professional sports is getting warped, and they carry a somber message to society in our contemporary times."(17) He continued along this theme by suggesting that "the idea of play and fun and enjoyment of the natural gifts of games is being warped by this incredible drive for money."(18) In comparing the games with a prize, such as the Super Bowl, Higgs concluded:"The more emphasis you put on the cultural prize, the bigger you make those prizes, the less regard and appreciation of the gift of the game itself, it seems to me." (19)

Do any of these opinions concur with your estimation of games? Are you one of the skeptics? If so, that probably is a sign that you have at least begun to ask if games are occupying the proper place in your life, your family's life, and the life of the culture at large. Before we become too cynical, though, let's consider more optimistic analyses.

In his book, *The Culture of Narcissism*, Christopher Lasch draws a fascinating parallel between sports and our need for traditions and order. He believes that an intelligent sports spectator is one of the keys to a retention of the positive nature of games. He writes: "One of the virtues of contemporary sports lies in their resistance to the erosion of standards and their capacity to appeal to a knowledgeable audience."(20) Michael Novak, who has written a thought-provoking book entitled *The Joy of Sports*, juxtaposes European and American traditions around the place of sports in America's history. He believes that the "streets of America, unlike the streets of Europe, do not involve us in stories and anecdotes rich with a thousand years of human struggle. Sports are our chief civilizing agent. Sports are our most universal art form. Sports tutor us in the basic lived experiences of the humanist tradition."(21) Novak continues his praise with a statement that echoes the Apostle Paul: "Play provides the fundamental metaphors and the paradigmatic experiences for understanding the other elements of life."(22) Is there a "happy medium" between the skeptical and optimistic views of games? Or should we bring the two views together in order to find a wise perspective? Perhaps a coupling of the two views provides creative positive tension that enables us to better evaluate the place of games in the Christian life.

Christians in a Competitive World

> *"I believe that God made me for a purpose. For China. But He also made me fast. And when I run, I feel His pleasure. To give it up would be to hold Him in contempt. . . . To win is to honor Him."(23)*

These poignant phrases are from *Chariots of Fire*, one of the truly great films. They were spoken by the actor who portrayed Eric Liddell, a great athlete and a great Christian. He is talking with his sister, who is pleading with him to fulfill his commitment to their mission in China. He was to fulfill

that commitment, but first he considered it his duty to run in the 1924 Paris Olympics for the glory of God. When I first saw the film I wept with joy and gratitude because of the film's portrayal of a man who understood and appreciated God's gift to him. In my estimation the film, and this scene in particular, contains a clear and eloquent statement of a Christian worldview as it applies to games, play, sports, or athletics. With Eric Liddell's words in mind, we will offer principles that can help us establish a foundation for a Christian's involvement in games. First, "play is best seen as an attitude, a state of mind rather than as a distinguishable set of activities."(24) One doesn't have to be involved in play to play; work can include an attitude of play as well.

Second, "play is not the key to being human, but being human is the key to play."(25) And being human includes a free spirit that is "celebrative and imaginative because of the possibilities God has for us in this world."(26)

Third, play should instill "an attitude that carries over into all of life, finding joyful expression in whatever we do, productive or not."(27)

Fourth, play should be seen as an act of worship. "It is the religious meaning of life that gives purpose and meaning to both work and play. A responsible relationship to God includes play."(28)

Some of you may be saying, "OK, I can think on these things in solitude or in group discussion, but what about principles that will help me when I'm actually involved in games? How should I play?" Application on the field is a challenge for many of us. Even Albert Camus, the existentialist writer, said that sports provided him with his "only lessons in ethics."(29) Thomas Aquinas "expressed three cautions that we would do well to observe nowadays. First, do not take pleasure in indecent or injurious play." Think of a sold-out football stadium of people screaming their approval as an opponent lies

immobile on the field. Such a reaction surely does not align with a Christian attitude toward games. “Second, do not lose your mental or emotional balance and self-control.” This may be one of the most challenging cautions. When we lose self-control during games, we are damaging what we say outside of games about our relationship with Christ. “Third, do not play in ways ill-fitting either the hour or the person.”(30) When we play and how we honor God in the process speak loudly about the place of games in our lives. So when we hear “Play ball!” or “Let the games begin!” or “Take your mark!,” let us remember, whether as participants or spectators, that God can honor our games, but He requires a playful attitude that honors Him.

Notes

1. Arthur Holmes, *Contours of a worldview* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1983), 226.

2. Ibid.

3. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15th ed., s.v. “Athletic Games and Contests.”

4. Ibid.

5. *Wycliffe Bible Encyclopaedia*, s.v. “Games.”

6. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

7. *Wycliffe Bible Encyclopaedia*.

8. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*, s.v. “Games.”

9. Ibid.

10. *The New Bible Dictionary*, s.v. “Games.”

11. Lewis Smedes, quoted in Holmes, *Contours of a worldview*, 230.

12. Ibid., 231.

13. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*.

14. Ibid.

15. Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock* (New York: Bantam, 1970), 289.

16. Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, quoted by Robert Higgs, on *Mars Hill Tapes*: May/June 1996, vol. 21, Ken Myers, ed.(Charlottesville, Va.: Mars Hill Tapes, 1996).

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.

20. Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism* (New York: Warner, 1979), 190.
21. Michael Novak, *The Joy of Sports* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), 27.

22. Ibid., 34.

23. David Puttnam, producer, *Chariots of Fire* (Burbank, Calif.: Warner Home Video, 1991).

24. Arthur Holmes, *Contours of a World View*, 224.

25. Ibid., 228.

26. Ibid., 231.

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid., 228.

29. Albert Camus, quoted in Michael Novak, *The Joy of Sports*, 172.

30. Thomas Aquinas, quoted in Arthur Holmes, *Contours of a World View*, 231.

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