



FaithLink

Connecting Faith and Life

Sports & COVID-19 by Alex Joyner



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The COVID-19 pandemic has led to the postponement and cancellation of major sporting events worldwide, from the Tokyo Olympics to the beginning of baseball season. What role do sports play in our sense of time and community? What spiritual significance can we find in our culture's investment in sports?

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The Day It All Got Real

There had been warning signs before March 11, 2020, that COVID-19 might change our lives, but nothing as stark as that night. The virus had slowly crept into pockets of the United States and we had begun to hear talk of hospital bed shortages in Italy and the cancellation of large conferences planned for the summer. Then Rudy Gobert got sick.

It was a Wednesday night in Oklahoma City, and Gobert, the center for the visiting Utah Jazz, had been listed as unavailable for the team's game with the Oklahoma City Thunder, due to illness. Then, just before tip-off, the National Basketball Association (NBA) issued a statement that Gobert had tested positive for COVID-19. The game was immediately cancelled and the fans seated in the already full arena were sent home. Later that night, the entire season was put on hold. "The NBA is suspending game play following the conclusion of tonight's schedule of games until further notice," the statement read.

The next day the National Hockey League and Major League Soccer joined the NBA in suspending their seasons. Major League Baseball announced that the biggest harbinger of spring for many people, Opening Day, would be delayed by at least two weeks. Three months later, Opening Day has still not been announced.

In the days, weeks, and months that followed there have been innumerable alterations to our lives brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. Sports might seem the least of our worries, but it's hard to underestimate its social

impact. As I write this, professional sports leagues are still trying to figure out how to come back, and it doesn't seem like the world will be anything like the one we knew until they do. This forces us to wonder why sports play such a big role in so many of our lives.

REFLECT:

- What changes happened in mid-March that helped you understand the seriousness of the COVID-19 pandemic?
- How frequently did you watch sporting events before the pandemic? Have you found yourself missing sports at all in the past three months?

Sports as Community Healing

Like me, your initial reaction to the suspension of live sports might have been, “Oh great, what will I watch now?” But more than the loss of entertainment, sports also represent a big business. *Bleacher Report* revealed that a 2013 summary of the sports industry in the United States listed 456,000 sport-related jobs. Beyond these jobs, there are stadium employees and other ancillary personnel employed for every live event. The economic impact on cities reaches into the billions. That same column reported that one team, the Chicago Cubs, generates “\$600 million annually for the state of Illinois.”

All of that revenue points to the huge civic interest we have in sports. Sports teams come to represent their cities and, in times of community crisis, we rally around our teams. “Boston Strong” became the slogan of the summer for that city after the bombings at the Boston Marathon in April 2013. The city’s baseball team paid tribute to the victims during their first series after the bombings and then rode the slogan all the way to a World Series victory later that year. Mike Moustakas, an opposing player, said, “It was an unbelievable feeling to . . . watch the city rally around the Red Sox . . . All I remember is being there and feeling how sports could heal in times of need.”

Columnist Vasilus Drimalitis recently wrote for *SB Nation* that a home run hit by Mike Piazza for the New York Mets in their first game back in the city following the September 11, 2001, attacks holds a similar meaning for him. “Sports can truly help us heal in the worst of times. One day, it will be safe to bring sports back, whether that happens in 2020 or in 2021 . . . I imagine they will play a similar role in helping us get back to something resembling normal, and they will play a big part in our collective healing.”

REFLECT:

- What is one of your favorite sports memories? What else do you recall about that day?
- When have you seen sports act as healing for your community or nation?

Sports and Time

In addition to drawing a community together, sports help us mark time. Many Christians noted that the rhythm of the liturgical year was disrupted by the closure of most churches during the pandemic shutdowns. Easter is generally a high-water mark for in-person attendance at churches. With the buildings shuttered, the celebration felt significantly more subdued.

Similarly, when the sporting events that normally mark our spring season began passing by, it seemed as though something important was missing. Could it really be May without the Kentucky Derby? June without the NBA finals? the summer of a presidential election year without the Olympics?

We were also deprived of making new memories. There are days I can remember with perfect clarity because they contained a major event in sports. For instance, I can vividly remember Game 7 of the 2001 World Series, which I watched in a tiny storefront in Mexico with a group of church members who had taken me in for a week. Any mention of that game immediately returns me to that particular time and place.

Many of us have found that we had unacknowledged calendars ticking within us. A part of us that moved with the cycles of the sports we love was out of sorts. A method our brains had devised for helping us remember had been short-circuited.

REFLECT:

- How do sporting events help us mark the changes of seasons for you?
- Are there any memories related to sports that help you remember other important moments in your life?

The Spiritual Significance of Sports

I once saw the biblical story of David confronting Goliath presented as if it were a soccer match with the Israelites and Philistines offering chants and cheers for their champions. In a way, David's rejection of the armor he was offered and his trust in God was a rebuke to those who put too much

stock in heroes. David told King Saul, "The LORD . . . who rescued me from the power of both lions and bears, will rescue me from the power of this Philistine" (1 Samuel 17:37).

In another way, David was an embodiment of the best ideals of his people. His faith, wit, and audacity were worth cheering for and, in a time of fear, he reminded his nation what they were all about.

When we invest in our teams, we want them to do the same for us. We want them to remind us of who we are at our best and how we can overcome. Sure, we sometimes love our sports to excess and the stadiums we build for them are surely grander than they need to be. But they also join us together and lift us up with hope to face the battles we must face. One day, they'll be back.

REFLECT:

- Why do we invest so many of our passions into sports?
- When is that investment helpful?

Sports Leading the Way Back

If sports were a signal that the pandemic was starting in earnest, they may also be a sign that things are slowly getting better. For many Americans, having sporting events again will be a sign that something like our old way of life is returning.

The National Hockey League (NHL), which suspended its season on the same day as the NBA, has developed detailed plans for its own return. The *New York Times* reported in late May that the NHL was looking at voluntary workouts in June, followed by a 24-team playoff, cancelling the remaining games that were on the schedule for the regular season.

However, the games will not look like regular games. They will almost certainly be played in empty arenas with testing for players and new features such as mandatory full-face shields and no fighting.

The planning going into decisions like this mimics the plans that many businesses and churches are developing to ease into reopening. Many organizations are realizing that they will have to look very different for some time to come. Churches will have to institute distancing, mandatory face coverings, restricted singing, and forgo the passing of any items.

For many, this will be an uncomfortable reality, but just like having a game to watch after a long absence of sports will feel like a sign of something larger, gathering together again as a church will feel like the end of a long wilderness journey, too.

REFLECT:

- What sports have you missed during this season? What church activities have you missed?
- What have you not missed?

Core Bible Passages

In 1 Samuel 17, we read the story of David and Goliath that we've all heard so many times. Israel and the Philistines were locked in a protracted standoff, with each standing on one of two mountains with a valley in between. When the Philistines sent their giant champion to challenge the Israelites to a contest, no one on the Israelite side volunteered to take up the cause until the young boy David showed up asking difficult questions. His victory over Goliath is a classic story of an underdog overcoming a heavy favorite. His "put me in, coach" attitude and steady faith in God both shamed and uplifted the Israelite army.

Leviticus 23 provides us with a record of the festivals that the people of Israel were to observe as they entered the land that God had promised them. By establishing rhythms for Sabbath, harvest festivals, and the celebration of Passover, the people were given ways to mark time and remember.

In 1 Corinthians 9:24-27, Paul uses sports metaphors about racing and fighting to encourage the early Christians to use all their skills to grow in discipleship and holiness. It is clear that athletic contests occupied an important place in their society as they do in ours and Paul could use them to illustrate his points.

REFLECT:

- In what ways is the David and Goliath story similar to a sporting event?
- How do sporting events help us mark time?
- What are some familiar sports metaphors that you have heard in Christian teaching? Come up with a new one to help guide Christians in the time of the pandemic.

United Methodists on the Run

What if a group of United Methodists took the summer to run across America? The idea captured the imagination of the Rev. Andrew Ware, pastor of Woods UMC in South Chesterfield, Virginia. Ware is an active runner who sees the sport as a way to extend his ministry. "It is one of my joys, not only to run, but also to connect with clergy and church-related people through their same passion or interest in the activity," Ware said.

A Richmond-based organization promoted the idea of a 5,000-kilometer (3,100 miles) race from San Francisco to New York that could be run virtually by teams of up to 24 runners. Jon Luginbill, executive director of Sports Backers, says, "The Great American 5,000 provides the opportunity to make the dream of running across the country a little more real, while raising money for Feeding America and supporting those in need during this crisis." The teams log miles from wherever they live, compete against other teams, and watch their progress on the race's website as they cross the country.

Ware pulled together his team (tentatively named the Active Methodists) from his Facebook connections. "The challenge seemed like an opportunity for a group of clergy and local church-connected individuals to collectively practice self-care and motivate one another as we seek to build healthy lifestyles while also doing ministry," Ware said.

REFLECT:

- How does your faith community promote an active lifestyle?
- How could you help connect with others for ministry through a shared passion, even during a time of social distancing?

Helpful Links

- Laura Depta wrote an article entitled “Twelve Ways Sports Make a Positive Impact” for *Bleacher Report*: <https://bleacherreport.com/articles/2347988-12-ways-sports-make-a-positiveimpact>
- Vasilus Drimalitis’ article about his experience of baseball as a healing act, “Memorable Mets Game: September 21, 2001,” can be found here: <https://www.amazinavenue.com/2020/5/26/21261570/mets-braves-memorable-game-september-21-2001-mike-piazza-home-run-victory-healing-america>
- For a look back at The Day It All Got Real, check out this article on March 12, 2020, by Mark Feinsand on MLB.com: <https://www.mlb.com/news/mlb-2020-season-delayed>

About the Writer

Alex Joyner is a writer and district superintendent of the United Methodist churches on Virginia’s Eastern Shore.

Next Week in **FaithLink**
Connecting Faith and Life

Law and Order: Race, Police, and Protests

by Lyndsey Medford

The murder of George Floyd by a police officer in Minneapolis has sparked protests across the nation and the world. How can we see the anger and frustration of these protests in historical context? As people of faith, how can we work to pursue peace that fully integrates the biblical demand for justice?



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Opening Prayer

Great God, who gifts us with bodies, minds, and hearts, you call us to use all that we have in service of you and others. When we forget the capacities you have given us, help us remember who we are and who you are. Let us be champions for you and run the race you have set before us; in Jesus' name. Amen.

Leader Helps

- Have several Bibles on hand and a markerboard and markers for writing lists or responses to reflection questions.
- Open the session with the provided prayer or one of your own.
- Remind the group that people have different perspectives and to honor these differences by treating one another with respect as you explore this topic together.
- Begin the group session by reviewing what has changed in the world of sports over the last few months. Invite group members to reflect on what they have missed and what they look forward to. Explore why sports play such a big role in our lives and whether that has changed because of the pandemic.
- Invite group members to share their favorite sports and sports teams. What memories do they have of cheering for these teams? How did they become fans of these teams? Have their fan allegiances changed through the years? Why?
- Read or review highlights of each section of this issue. Use the *REFLECT* questions to stimulate discussion.
- Close the session with the provided prayer or one of your own.

Plan an Alternative Olympics

As a way of challenging your group to be active, invite them to create short video clips of themselves as they engage in one of their favorite sporting activities or hobbies. If you have the ability, ask group members to send their clip to you. Create a montage of the activities and award “Olympic” medals to the participants for the activities in which they engaged. Invite them to talk about why they love their sport or hobby.

Closing Prayer

God, you call us together as a body, a church, a team. You give us purpose and understanding. You call us to utilize our gifts, skills, wit, wisdom, and audacity. In Christ, you were victorious over sin and death and lifted us to life. May we be faithful to your way; in Jesus' name. Amen.