

RECREATION, SPORT AND THE SPIRITUAL LIFE
STMA 593-02

Professor: Patrick Kelly, S.J., Ph.D.

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Office Hours: by appt.

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Class Time: TH 1:30-4:20 p.m.

Class location: Hunthausen 160

Credits: 5

Why Study Play, Games and Sport?

Play, games and sport are human universals. According to P.S. Frederickson, "There is no society known to man (sic) which does not have games of the sort in which individuals set up purely artificial obstacles and get satisfaction from overcoming them."¹ During the course of the twentieth century these activities arguably assumed a greater degree of cultural importance than they ever had before. Philosopher Max Scheler observed over seventy years ago, "Scarcely an international phenomenon of the day deserves social and psychological study to the degree that sport does. Sport has grown immeasurably in scope and in social importance, but the meaning of sport has received little in the way of serious attention."² Sport has only increased in cultural significance since then, without a concomitant increase in reflection.

The lack of reflection on sport is even more troubling in the American context given the particular significance sport has in contemporary American life. Sociologist George Sage began his book *Sport and American Society* by pointing out that "sport is such a pervasive human activity that to ignore it is to overlook one of the most significant aspects of contemporary American society."³ He comments that sport is a social phenomenon which extends into such areas of life as education, politics, economics, art, the mass media, and even international diplomatic relations. He continues to say that "even an unbiased stranger to America would soon realize that sport is one of the most pervasive activities in our culture."⁴ The significance that sport has in the culture leads some commentators to suggest that "if there is a religion in America today, it is sport."⁵

In America today, involvement in sport begins early and has a profound influence on young people. Participants in Little Leagues begin playing at seven or eight years of age, and then graduate through different levels of play. Soccer leagues start even younger as do, surprisingly, some hockey leagues. It would be difficult to overestimate the impact of this participation on the human formation of the young people involved.

It is only in the last fifteen years that Catholics in the U.S. have begun to reflect on this aspect of culture from theological and spiritual perspectives. And there are still only a handful of articles and books on the topic. The paucity of attention to play, games and sport is not acceptable from Catholic theologians and scholars of spirituality, because a basic principle of a Catholic

¹Baum, Gregory and Coleman, John, eds. *Concilium: Sport*. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1989), 3.

² *Ibid.*, 4.

³ George Sage ed., *Sport and American Society: Selected Readings* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1974) 5.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵ *Ibid.*

sensibility is that religious people should be finding God “in all things.” In his book *Catholicism* Richard McBrien writes:

No theological principle or focus is more characteristic of Catholicism or more central to its identity than the principle of sacramentality. The Catholic vision sees God in and through all things: other people, communities, movements, events, places, objects, the world at large, the whole cosmos.⁶

The Subject Matter of this Course

After consideration of why it is important to take sport seriously from a theological perspective, we will consider sport in American culture both in its positive and negative, or graced and shadow sides. With respect to the former, we will consider the research of social scientist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, author of the flow theory, along with scholarship on play and narrative accounts of contemporary athletes. This literature will provide us with an account of the way sports participation can contribute to a healthy sense of embodiment and lead to human and even spiritual growth. With respect to the shadow side, we will consider how influential modern philosophical conceptions of the body contribute to the tendency of contemporary athletes to have a mechanistic and utilitarian view of their own bodies. We will also consider how the tendency of the “work ethic” to take over all aspects of American culture and the commodification of sport affects athletes’ experiences of their bodies in sport.

A further elaboration of theological sources and methodology

In the first week of this course, we will consider basic themes in Catholic theology and spirituality. These are a) the sacramental or analogical imagination and the notion of “finding God in all things,” b) the view of the person as a unity of body, mind and spirit, c) an emphasis in Catholic social teaching on the dignity of the human person d) an emphasis on “grace perfecting nature” and on human and spiritual development as related, e) sin as having a social dimension and leading to the diminishment of persons and f) the importance of dialogue with other religious traditions.

These themes provide the rationale for taking play, games and sport seriously, as well as the framework within which we consider the material for the rest of the course. That is, if persons are supposed to be finding God in all things, then they should be doing so in both their work or study and play or recreation, or in their minds and bodies. The criteria for evaluating sport programs or policies should be the dignity of the human person, and what leads to the integral development of persons. In order to understand this, we must have a developmental account of human life and a sense of how sports participation contributes to this or does not. M. Csikszentmihalyi’s research on the flow experience is such a rich resource in this regard because he has specifically studied young people who were participating in sport, asking questions about how such participation does or does not contribute to human growth and well being. His work is also helpful for a class such as this because the phenomenology of the flow experience shares many similarities with the phenomenology of the spiritual life as this has been described by spiritual writers in many different traditions. This gives us the opportunity to reflect on the ways in which sport participation may or may not be an occasion for the spiritual growth of the participants. It is important that we be open to dialogue with other traditions, because we will be

⁶ Richard McBrien, *Catholicism* (HarperSanFrancisco: San Francisco, CA, 1994), 1196.

reading authors who reflect on sport from the perspective of non-Christian spiritual traditions. Students will be asked to consider what we can learn from these insights about human and spiritual growth.

In a consideration of the contemporary sports scene we see that there is a tendency for athletes to view their bodies in a mechanistic and utilitarian way and in the process to become alienated from their own bodies and affectivity. This dynamic is related to the tendency of male athletes in particular to 'objectify' the bodies of others, especially in the area of sexuality. Complicating this is the tendency of the work ethic to take over games and sports, so play is marginalized, and for commodification to make winning all that much more important. If we view these dynamics from a theological perspective, we find instances of "social sin." We can observe the negative effects of such sin in the diminishment of persons as they are described in narrative accounts.

Course Objectives:

When you have successfully completed this course, you will:

- a) be able to articulate basic elements of a Catholic theological and spiritual outlook and the implication of these for the academic study of sport
- b) be able to give an account of the human and cultural significance of play from the perspectives of philosophy, social sciences and theology/spirituality
- c) be able to explain some of the more influential philosophical and theological accounts of the mind-body (and spirit) relationship in the western world and their implications for contemporary sport
- d) be able to draw on the perspectives of philosophy, the social sciences and theology/spirituality to explain the dynamics at work in sport leading to
 - i. human development and self-transcendence and
 - ii. human diminishment and desolation with respect to the spiritual life
- e) be able to explain the relationship between the kinds of truths learned in the different academic disciplines employed in the course.

Books

Randolph Feezell, *Sport, Play and Ethical Reflection* (Champaign, Ill: University of Illinois Press, 2006).

Phil Jackson, *Sacred Hoops: Spiritual Lessons of a Hardwood Warrior*, (Hyperion: New York, 1995)

Readings on ANGEL

Learning Activities

1st Paper – 25%

Final Paper – 60%

Participation 15%

Week 1 Introduction

TH March 31 Introduction

Week 2 Setting the Stage

TH April 7

Richard McBrien, "What is Catholicism?" Ch. 1 of *Catholicism* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1994), pgs. 8-16; George Sage, *Sport and American Society: Selected Readings* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Co., 1974), pgs. 5-9; **Lawrence Cunningham, "What Would You Be Without Your Body?" in *US Catholic*, Dec. 1995, pgs. 6-13; Wilkie Au, *By Way of the Heart: Toward a Holistic Spirituality* (Paulist Press: Mahwah, NJ, 1989), pgs. 15-20; John Paul II, "International Jubilee of Sport: Homily at Olympic Stadium," in *L'Osservatore Romano*, April 24, 1984; William Johnston, S.J., "Interreligious Dialogue," Ch. 1 of *The Mirror Mind: Spirituality and Transformation* (San Francisco: Haper & Row, 1981), pgs. 1-7. Patrick Kelly, S.J., Ch. 1 of *The Soul of Sport*; R. Feezell, "Sport, Bodily Excellence and Play," and "The Freedom of Play," Ch. 1-2 in *Sport, Play and Ethical Reflection*.**

Week 3 Play, Sport and Human Well-Being: A Philosophical Perspective

TH April 14 Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, "Play and Intrinsic Rewards," in *The Journal of Humanistic Psychology* Vol. 15, No. 3, Summer, 1975; Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, "Enjoyment and the Quality of Life," Ch. 3 of *FLOW: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990); Michael Murphy and Rhea White, "Mystical Sensations," Ch. 2 and 5 of *In the Zone: Transcendent Experience in Sports* (New York: Penguin Books, 1995) (excerpts)

Week 4 Play, Sport and Human Well-Being: A Social Sciences Perspective

TH April 21 Phil Jackson and Hugh Delanty, *Sacred Hoops: Spiritual Lessons of a Hardcourt Warrior* Introduction – Jackson, *Sacred Hoops*, Introduction -- Ch. 5

Week 5 Play, Sport and Human Well-Being: Spiritual Perspectives (non-Christian)

TH April 28 Jackson, *Sacred Hoops*, Ch. 6-Epilogue

Week 6 Play, Sport and Human Well-Being: Spiritual Perspectives (non-Christian)

TH May 5 Patrick Kelly, S.J., "Flow, Sport and the Spiritual Life," in *Theology, Ethics and Transcendence in Sports* (New York: Routledge, 2010); James V. Schall, Chs. 3 and 6 in *Far Too Easily Pleased: A Theology of Play, Contemplation and Festivity*; Julie Byrne, *O God of Players: The Story of the Immaculata Mighty Macs*, N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 2003 (excerpts); *Hoop Dreams* (film, begin)

Week 7 Play, Sport and Human Well-Being: Christian Perspectives

TH May 12 *Hoop Dreams* (film) Klieber, D.A. and Kirshnit E.E., "Sport Involvement and Identity Formation," In L. Diamant ed., *Mind-body maturity: The psychology of sports, exercise, and fitness* (New York: Hemisphere, 1990), pages 201-208; D. Stanley Eitzen, "The Myth of Upward Mobility," <http://www.prostaronline.com/articles/upwardmobility.pdf>; Patricia A. Adler and Peter Adler, *Backboards and Blackboards: College Athletes and Role Engulfment* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), pgs. 155-162 and 225-231; Klaus Meier, "Embodiment, Sport and Meaning". 1st Paper due

Week 8 Play, Sport and Human Diminishment: Social Sciences Perspectives

TH May 19 Joan Ryan, "They stole her soul and they still have it," Ch. 2 of *Little Girls in Pretty Boxes: the making and breaking of elite gymnasts and figure skaters*, New York: Doubleday, 1995; Patrick Kelly, S.J., "Entirely Body and Entirely Spirit," Ch. 6 of *The Soul of Sport*; Bob Welch and George Vescey, *Five O'clock Comes Early: A Cy Young Award Winner Recounts His Greatest Victory* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991) (selected excerpts); "An Affair of Flutes: An Appreciation of Play," by K. Meier, *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* Fall 1980, Vol. 7 Issue 2, p. 24-45.

Week 9 Play, Sport and Human Diminishment: Philosophical and Theological Perspectives

TH May 26 "Money, Television, Drugs and the Win: Dilemmas of Modern Sports," by Elliot J. Gorn & Warren Goldstein in *A Brief History of American Sports*; Lance Rentzel, *When All the Laughter Turned to Sorrow*, New York: Saturday Review Press, 1972 (excerpts); John Kavanaugh, S.J., *Following Christ in a Consumer Society*, (excerpts)

Week 10 Play, Sport and Human Diminishment: Historical, Philosophical and Theological Perspectives

TH June 2 Student presentation of final papers

Tuesday, June 7 @ 5:00 p.m. Final Paper due

COURSE GRADING SCALE

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|----|--------|--|
| A | 100-94 | Superior performance (not just effort) |
| A- | 93-90 | |
| B+ | 89-87 | |
| B | 86-83 | Good performance |
| B- | 82-80 | |
| C+ | 79-77 | |
| C | 76-73 | Adequate performance |
| C- | 72-70 | |
| D+ | 69-67 | |
| D | 66-63 | Poor performance |
| D- | 62-60 | |
| F | 59-0 | Failing performance |

Additional Help

For additional help in understanding the material for this course, in writing papers, or in developing more fruitful study strategies, consider using the following resources:

Learning Center

Loyola 100, www.seattleu.edu/SAS/LA

peer tutoring, individual learning consultations, or study strategy workshops

Writing Center

Engineering 307, www.seattleu.edu/writingcenter/

peer assistance with any phase of a writing project

Disabilities Services

If you have, or think you may have, a disability (including an ‘invisible disability’ such as a learning disability, a chronic health problem, or a mental health condition) that interferes with your performance as a student in this class, you are encouraged to arrange support services and/or accommodations through Disabilities Services staff in the Learning Center, Loyola 100, 206 296-5740, www.seattleu.edu/SAS/DS/. Disability-based adjustments to course expectations can be arranged only through this process.