

GLORIFYING GOD IN SPORTS

THE
CHRISTIAN
ATHLETE

The word 'CHRISTIAN' is rendered in red, with the letter 'I' replaced by a black silhouette of a sprinter in mid-stride. The sprinter is positioned over the letter 'I', with its legs and arms extending into the letter's space. The word 'ATHLETE' is rendered in dark blue below it.

BRIAN SMITH

What people are saying about ...

The Christian Athlete

“Brian is contributing much needed biblical understanding to one of the most powerful, culture-shaping mediums in the world—sports and competition. For the athletes and coaches who allow this content to help them integrate faith and sport, their athletic experience will be greatly enhanced!”

Mark Householder, president
of Athletes in Action

“As an Olympic softball player who loves Jesus, I wish I’d had this book in my hands when I was competing. Its timely message about combining faith and sport is needed more than ever for the days we are living in. It will impact Christian athletes in ways that will transcend the playing field for the rest of their lives.”

Leah Amico, three-time Olympic Gold Medalist,
author of *Softball, Glory & God’s Story*

“This is the best book I have read in the realm of sports and faith. Brian does a masterful job of drawing us closer to our King in the context of our athletic endeavors. Our culture is in desperate need of a book like this, as we as believers so often fail to integrate our faith into sports. This should be a required read for any Christian athlete, coach, or administrator who is seeking to glorify God through sports.”

Dr. Tim Sceggel, director of athletics
and professor at Covenant College

“*The Christian Athlete* by Brian Smith is full of nuggets, wisdom, and everything you need to know about how to live out your faith as a Christian athlete. I believe this book will become the go-to read on this subject.”

Jason Romano, director of media for Sports Spectrum and author of *Live to Forgive*

“*The Christian Athlete* combines biblical instruction, theological insight, and practical wisdom to help athletes glorify God through the sports they play. Brian combines years of experience at the intersection of faith and sport in this unique and helpful book. It addresses and answers the question every Christian athlete should wrestle with: *What does God want from me as an athlete?*”

Chris Maragos, two-time Super Bowl champion, host of the *Mission of Truth* podcast

“For thirty-three seasons as the Detroit Lions chaplain (I know ... lots of losses), I worked with hundreds of athletes who were all asking, ‘How do I apply my faith on the field?’ I wish I’d had this book. Brian lays out a comprehensive vision of how God wants to work in and through the athlete who is committed to Him. This is a vision we all need for life on and off the field.”

Dave Wilson, cohost of *Family Life Today*, former Detroit Lions chaplain

“Brian Smith marvelously intersects the worlds of athletics and Christianity. *The Christian Athlete* is a practical roadmap for both the novice and the seasoned athlete. As a leading voice in Christian

athletics, Brian presses into relevant cultural topics that are difficult to discern and define. *The Christian Athlete* arms athletic directors, coaches, and athletes to engage with culture where they are at. Whether you are striving to grow in your faith or intent on being a person of influence, this book is a must-read.”

Ross Douma, director of athletics
at Dordt University

“Brian Smith does a phenomenal job of using Scripture and practical advice to help not just athletes but coaches and administrators as well to glorify God through sports. This book is one that I definitely plan on reading with my two young sons when they grow up and start playing sports at a competitive level.”

Lee De Leon, cofounder and
president of ADs for Christ

“One of the things I love about Brian’s writing is that it comes from years of experience as an athlete and a minister to and with athletes. In this book, Brian draws on that experience to provide a thoughtful and practical guide to the questions, concerns, and issues that many Christian athletes wrestle with as they try to live out their faith in sports. *The Christian Athlete* is an excellent addition to the growing conversation on Christian engagement with sports, useful for both athletes and those who work with them.”

Paul Putz, PhD, assistant director
of the Faith & Sports Institute

“How should a Christian athlete think about winning and losing? What about pressure and practice and platform? While reading *The Christian Athlete*, I was repeatedly reminded how frequently we as Christian athletes need to commit our lives to win, lose, tie, and compete in a distinctly Christian way. I’ve played tackle football for over two decades and still need to be taught and reminded what being a holy competitor actually looks like. From riding the bench to retirement, Brian has words of wisdom and encouragement for any athlete who wants to take their walk with Christ to the next level.”

Austin Carr, former NFL wide receiver,
codirector of Athletes in Action New Orleans

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BRIAN SMITH

DAVID  COOK™

transforming lives together

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Contents

Introduction	9
Chapter 1: On Glory and God	13
Chapter 2: On Motivation	33
Chapter 3: On Pressure	43
Chapter 4: On Winning	60
Chapter 5: On Losing	76
Chapter 6: On Injuries	91
Chapter 7: On Practice	105
Chapter 8: On Teammates	115
Chapter 9: On Riding the Bench	129
Chapter 10: On Gray Areas	144
Chapter 11: On Coaches	155
Chapter 12: On Mission	170
Chapter 13: On Platform	181
Chapter 14: On Retirement	199
Conclusion	214
Appendix: How to Craft Your Sports Testimony	225
Acknowledgments	233
Notes	234



Introduction

“God, what do you even want from me as an athlete?”

I wish I would have asked that question and listened for a response instead of just telling him what *I* wanted when it came to my sport.

I recited one Bible verse before every cross-country race in high school and college. And no, it wasn't Philippians 4:13. I figured everyone else was using that one so I would try something different in an attempt to stand out.

Besides, I prayed the “Philippians prayer” (*I can do all things through Christ!*) during basketball season. Distance running deserved a running verse.

My pre-race prayer came from Isaiah:

They who wait for the LORD shall renew their
strength;
they shall mount up with wings like
eagles;
they shall run and not be weary;
they shall walk and not faint. (40:31)

It's hard to tell if God ever answered the prayer the way I hoped. Racing never felt easy, and my legs often felt like I was carrying a rhinoceros as the finish line approached. That's a far cry from the experience of mounting an eagle, whatever that's supposed to mean.

The truth is, I never fully understood what God wanted from me when it came to applying my faith to my sport. Praying before competition seemed like a good start. But what else did God want from me?

I'm guessing you're reading this because you're asking yourself a similar question: *How do I integrate my faith with my sport? How do I do this sport in a way that honors God?*

The purpose of this book is to answer that question. I've written this from a biblical perspective aimed at helping you glorify Jesus Christ in every facet of your sport.

This book is for you, the athlete. Not your coach. Not your parents. Not your fans. Athlete, consider this book an assist from me to you.

With that being said, though, I know others involved in sports can benefit from what's laid out in this book. That list includes but is not limited to coaches, athletic directors, athletic administrators, and parents of kids involved in sport. If that's you, I'm going to refer to you as "coach." At the end of each chapter, after reflection questions for athletes, I provide additional ones for coaches to work through.

Speaking of coaches, in this book I sometimes refer to the darker side of coaching. In no way am I insinuating that *all* coaches act in those ways.

My aim in *The Christian Athlete* is to biblically shape the way you think about your sport and present a practical approach to having

a God-centered perspective for every challenge the world of athletics throws at you. I rely heavily on the Word of God and my own experience both as a former competitive athlete and as a coach who has been working with and discipling college athletes since 2006.

The first chapter addresses what God ultimately wants from us.

After laying the groundwork, we'll look through the different circumstances brought about by sports and seek to understand how we can glorify God in each of them. We will explore potentially new ways of experiencing, appreciating, and practicing obedience to God in the middle of all the circumstances athletes face—motivation, pressure, winning, losing, injuries, practice, teammates, riding the bench, gray areas, coaches, and retirement.

Finally, we'll see how the mission and platform afforded to athletes offer a unique opportunity to spread the gospel. With that in mind, I'll give you practical training to leverage your privileged position for the glory of God and the advancement of his kingdom.



How do I integrate my faith with my sport? How do I do this sport in a way that honors God?

We need to learn to make our sport something that draws us closer to God. We were created with a longing that cannot be filled by anything or anyone but God. There will always be a ceiling on the amount of happiness earthly things can bring us, and more often than not, we will be disappointed at how low that ceiling is.

That will be a continual theme of this book. Sports are a good gift from God to us to enjoy, but we can't expect something from

them—like soul-filling joy and contentment—that God never intended. Only he can provide those eternal longings inside us.

Ecclesiastes 3:11 says that God has put eternity in our hearts. The implication is simple: we cannot be satisfied by earthly things. When we use our sport to get more of God, we align ourselves with the way God intended his good gifts, like sports, to work. And in the end, we also get the maximum amount of joy out of our sport. As we grow in our understanding of that, we are freed up to enjoy sports for what they are (a good gift from God) instead of trusting them for what they can never give (ultimate purpose, meaning, and satisfaction).

“God, what do you even want from me as an athlete?” That’s the subject of the first chapter.



On Glory and God

You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means.

Iñigo Montoya, *The Princess Bride*

What does God even want from you as an athlete? The same thing he wants across the entirety of his creation: glory.

In order for you to understand how to integrate your faith into the sport you compete in, you must first understand this essential concept. This chapter will provide a brief overview of the doctrine of glory. We'll quickly get to how to apply it to all aspects of your life in sports, but it's paramount that we start here.

Author and theologian John Piper shines light on a groundbreaking biblical truth:

God's ultimate goal is to preserve and display his infinite and awesome greatness and worth, that is, his glory.

God has many other goals in what he does. But none of them is more ultimate than this. They are all

subordinate. God's overwhelming passion is to exalt the value of his glory. To that end he seeks to display it, to oppose those who belittle it, and to vindicate it from all contempt. It is clearly the uppermost reality in his affections. He loves his glory infinitely.¹

Please do not just take Piper's word for it or my own. Look at what the Bible (God's Word) has to say about it.²

- Isaiah 43:6–7—God created us for his glory.
- Jeremiah 13:11—God identifies his purpose for calling Israel: his glory.
- Psalm 106:7–8—God rescued Israel from Egypt to make known his power.
- Exodus 14:4, 18—God spared Israel from Pharaoh's attack for the glory of his name.
- 2 Samuel 7:23—God granted victory to Israel for the glory of his name.
- 2 Kings 19:34—Jerusalem was saved for the glory of God's name.
- Ezekiel 36:22–23—Israel returned from exile to vindicate the glory of his name.
- Habakkuk 2:14—One day God will fill the earth with the knowledge of his glory.

Okay, but those were all from the Old Testament. What does the New Testament have to say?

- John 7:18—Jesus sought the glory of God in his actions.
- Matthew 5:16—Our good works bring glory to God.
- John 14:13—God is glorified through our answered prayers.
- John 12:27–28; 17:1—Jesus’ motivation for enduring suffering was God’s glory.
- John 17:24—Jesus’ desire for us is to see and enjoy his glory.
- Ephesians 1:4–6, 12, 14—God chose his people for his glorious grace.
- 1 Corinthians 10:31—We are implored to do everything for God’s glory.
- 1 Peter 4:11—We should serve in a way that brings glory to God.

Get the picture? God is infinitely passionate about his glory. You probably already knew that on some level. My guess, though, is that your knowledge was probably based more on cultural norms than biblical conviction. After all, everybody—especially athletes—knows you are supposed to “give glory to God.”

But what does that mean? If you can’t give a clear answer to that question, you need to keep reading.

Before we can really understand what God means by *glory*, we must first see how *our* understanding of *glory*, especially in sports, is often wrong.

Glory ... and Other Words We Don't Understand

I have a good friend who heard a word his freshmen year of college and thought two things:

1. That sounds funny!
2. I'm going to start using it.

This friend made this particular word a regular part of his vocabulary and spent the better part of his freshmen year using it at practice, parties, Christian events, and in everyday conversation. What was the word?

Mofos.

This friend soon found out that it sounded even better when you put the word *crazy* in front of it.

He was ignorant as to what this meant, and it was not until someone lovingly pulled him aside and informed him what he was actually saying when he called people “crazy mofos” that he finally stopped using it.

While it sounded humorous to him, this friend had unintentionally offended many people.

Here's the thing: we make a similar error with the word *glory*.

I think very few of us know what glory is and what it looks like to give it to God. My fear is that “glory to God” has become such a well-rehearsed line by well-meaning, Christ-following athletes that we have become ignorant as to what it actually means or how to recognize it. We throw it around mechanically—knowing we are supposed to say it but unaware of its significance.

As a result, we may be unintentionally offending the infinite God of the universe. It can be very foolish to use a word without understanding its full depth, especially one as important as *glory*.

Though inadvertent, our ignorance surrounding the word *glory* can potentially lead us into three treacherous traps. By no means is this an attempt to pigeonhole every Christian athlete who has ever used the phrase “glory to God.” These are dangers we can fall prey to, however, when we have a distorted view of glory.

Danger #1: Prideful Redirection

We’ve all seen it plenty of times. An athlete makes a fantastic play. The crowd goes crazy. The athlete celebrates with his or her teammates. After the game, the interview follows a predictable script:

Media: “Can you walk us through the big play you made?”

Athlete: “I mean, I want to start by giving all the glory to God and thank him for this moment.”

This is called redirecting praise. Somebody offers you a compliment and you attempt to deflect praise by giving credit to someone else. What possible danger is there in that?

Acts 14 gives us some insight into this. Paul and Barnabas were in a city called Lystra, and Paul healed a guy who had been unable to walk since birth. Let’s begin in verse 11:

When the crowds saw what Paul had done, they lifted up their voices, saying in Lycaonian, “The

gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!” Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. And the priest of Zeus, whose temple was at the entrance to the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates and wanted to offer sacrifice with the crowds. (vv. 11–13)

Athlete, can you recognize what is going on in this scenario? Let’s recap. Paul and Barnabas did something amazing that drew the attention of the crowd. The crowd went crazy, screaming their names and comparing them to the all-time greats. Maybe they even did the wave. This type of behavior happens every week in our sports-saturated culture.

Paul and Barnabas had a great response. They did not say, “All the glory to God!” They did not say, “Thanks, guys. We just want to take a second to thank our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” They didn’t double-fist pound their chests and point to the sky. Instead, they ran to the scene and pleaded with the crowd to stop worshipping them. Paul and Barnabas did not buy into their hype. Even though the crowd cheered them on, they actively pushed against the praise.

Paul and Barnabas understood the danger of being praised and worshipped. That story happened in Acts 14. Just a couple of chapters earlier, in Acts 12, a man was struck dead by the Lord because he failed to give God proper glory. Paul and Barnabas show us the right way to respond to glory that belongs only to God. They aggressively attacked the praise lavished on them and sought to get the spotlight off themselves.

Danger #2: Heartless Dedication

The concept here is pretty simple. We tell fans and media that we play our sport to glorify God or as a grateful response for what he has done for us. Many Christian athletes will use the phrase *AOI* (audience of One) as a way of saying they play for God.

If that's truly the case, great! My fear, however, is that Christian athletes can give excellent lip service to the Lord, when in reality our hearts are not centered on God or even thinking about him at all. The "all glory to God" declarations after a game become merely a robotic response—maybe with good intentions but delivered without serious reflection on whether or not what we just did *actually* was glorifying to him.

I am guilty of this many Sundays at church. While singing praise songs, my mind will repeatedly drift toward plans for the rest of the afternoon. Outwardly, I look like a great Christian who is singing to God. But my heart is often disconnected from the words coming out of my mouth. It happens in church—and it happens in sports. If you are claiming to compete for an audience of One but your words aren't backed up by your attitude and your actions, not only during the competition but also through the daily rhythms of your sport, I want to plead with you to please be careful.

Isaiah 1 paints a terrifying picture of how God responds to this kind of hypocrisy. The people of God were offering sacrifices and throwing parties and festivals as prescribed by the law. They were doing and saying all the right things.

But there was a problem.

God was not a fan. In fact, he said he actually hated their religious faking at a soul level (Isa. 1:14).

The people of God had fallen into the dangerous trap of heartless dedication. They were saying the right things. They were even doing some of the right things. If it were today, they probably would be tweeting the right things too. But the connection between their hearts and their hands was severed. Rehearsing the right phrases or words does not score any brownie points with a jealous God who wants more than our lip service.

Danger #3: End Product Over Process

A third danger we can fall prey to when we don't fully understand what glory is and how to give it to God is that we can misunderstand what the Lord really desires from us.

Have you ever noticed the moments when we do or do not give glory to God?

After the game-winning play? Yep.

After a big performance? Yep.

After losing a big game? Nope.

When suffering an injury? Nope.

We wrongly assume that God gets the glory primarily when we win.

Does he want us to play with excellence? Absolutely. I would argue (and I do in chapter 4) that doing so reflects his image very well.

The problem, however, is that we often believe God is more glorified through the person who hit the game-winning shot than through the defender who gave it everything he had but failed. We have made a dangerous link between earthly success and the primary way God is glorified.

Beyond that, we far too often assume that God's glory through sport comes mainly during the game, race, or match itself. Competition is important. And all your training, thinking, and preparation lead to the moment when you risk it all against an opponent. But competition makes up about 1 percent of what you do as an athlete. The other 99 percent of the time is spent practicing, lifting, eating, sleeping, stretching, watching film, practicing again, traveling, and so on.



We have made a dangerous link between earthly success and the primary way God is glorified.

I would spend three months training for a race that took about four minutes to complete. God doesn't want only what we do in competition. He wants everything, including our hearts.

The book of 1 Samuel shows that our hearts are actually the apex of what God is after. God sent Samuel to choose the next king of Israel from among Jesse's sons. Predictably, Jesse brought out the son he thought was the best option. Here's how the scene plays out:

When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, "Surely the LORD's anointed is before him." But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart." (16:6–7)

In a sports-centered, top-plays culture, we are easily deceived into believing that what impresses us must also impress God. It's an easy mistake to make. But it's not one without consequences.

These three dangers are the result of our wrong assumptions about glory. As was the case with my friend misunderstanding what he was saying, we must have a clear understanding of what we're talking about if we want to give God what he desires most. Glory is literally a weighty concept.

What Is God's Glory?

Glory simply means "weight." It means a particular object is heavy with worth or significance. And the more glory an object has, the more it will affect the environment around it and cause people to notice.

Tim Keller states that *God's* glory is "at least the combined magnitude of all God's attributes and qualities put together."³ In a sense, Keller is saying that God's glory is the combined weight of everything that makes God *God*. His love, justice, goodness, wrath, omniscience, omnipotence, majesty, wisdom, and grace are all aspects of who he is and, when combined, are "at least" what makes up his glory.

John Piper unpacks God's glory this way:

What is it? I believe the glory of God is the going public of his infinite worth. I define the holiness of God as the infinite value of God, the infinite intrinsic worth of God. And when that goes public

in creation, the heavens are telling the glory of God, and human beings are manifesting his glory, because we're created in his image, and we're trusting his promises so that we make him look gloriously trustworthy.⁴

If we combine Keller's and Piper's definitions of God's glory, we could conclude that God's glory is at least the weight of everything that makes him God and the declaration of that weight for others to notice.

The big (glorious!) question that remains for athletes is this: *In light of how much glory God already has, how can we possibly give glory to God through our sport?*

What Does It Mean to Give God Glory?

Giving glory to God certainly doesn't mean that we can somehow add to his glory by what we do or say. God is not lacking in glory; in fact, God is not lacking in any good quality. That's a foundational truth that actually frees us from inflated views of our own importance.

To get this concept, it might be helpful to look at how this plays out in sports. Think of LeBron James. When fans chant his name, cheer him on, and, in an odd sense, worship him, they are not making him a better basketball player. He is already an incredible basketball player. When fans cheer for him and talk about his greatness as a basketball player, they are going public with the truth about him so others can know and be affected by it too.

See the difference? He's already a great basketball player, and this is demonstrated by what he does on the court. The fans give him glory by acknowledging his greatness.

So giving God glory means thinking and acting in a way that pleases him and draws attention to who he is. As an athlete, you bring glory to God when you think and act in a way that pleases him and draws attention to who he is.

But who is he?

God as Father

For us to know what God wants, we first need to know who he truly is. This can be difficult, of course. He is infinite, and we are limited. Yet there is much that he has revealed about himself that we can understand.

Paul never penned a letter to the church at Lambeau Field or Madison Square Garden, so we will never fully know how God views athletic achievements, especially those “given” to him. Through the life of Jesus and his many parables, though, we do get a glimpse of how God desires to be seen.

Before Jesus began his public ministry, he was baptized by his cousin, John the Baptist. As he rose from the water, a voice from heaven declared “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” (Matt. 3:17). Jesus healed the sick. He raised the dead. He gave sight to the blind. He showed dignity to the undignified. He died for our sins and rose from the dead, giving us access to a restored relationship with God the Father. And before Jesus did any of that, God declared his pleasure over Jesus based on sonship—not performance.

In his classic book *Knowing God*, J. I. Packer answers the question: What is a Christian? “The question can be answered in many ways, but the richest answer I know is that a Christian is one who has God as Father.”⁵

This is good news for us not only as Christians but also as Christians who happen to be athletes. God has revealed himself as Father, which is a relational description we’re familiar with, even if we’ve known only imperfect fathers. As a perfect Father, God’s primary pleasure with us is grounded in our status as his adopted sons or daughters. But we’re not born with that status.

What Is the Gospel?

Before we go any further, we need to make sure we understand the basic gospel message. It’s a message that starts with some bad news before getting to the best news the world has ever heard. Much of this book assumes you understand the message below and have based your right standing before God on it. If you have, this should be a good refresher, contextualized to you as an athlete. If you haven’t heard this message, this is good news that demands a response.

First Things First

The bad news: We do not enter this world as children of God. None of us do. The Bible actually says we “were by nature children of wrath” (Eph. 2:3).

It gets worse: The gap that separates us from God is caused by our own sin. We are all guilty of it, according to Romans 3:23.

And it gets even worse: Romans 6:23 says we must pay a penalty for our disobedience. “The wages of sin is death.”

To sum it up, we are born not as God's children but as objects of his wrath because of our sin. And the price we must pay for that sin is death. That's the bad news.

If we're honest with ourselves, I think we all know that something inside us is ... off. And as athletes, we often want to fix it ourselves. Our athletic mentality says, *I can see where I am weak in a specific area or skill set. So my next step is to work hard at it and get better.* That works in sports. Sometimes it works in life. But when it comes to our relationship with God, no amount of spiritual training or "getting ourselves right" will bring God to say, "Yeah, you're good now."

Athlete, you can't come into relationship with the God of the universe on your own terms. That's the bad news.

So who's ready for some good news?

The word *gospel* actually means "good news," so we'll refer to it as such. Romans 6:23 sounds like doom and gloom, but it's followed by very good news indeed. There is always a *but* with God. In its entirety, the verse reads: "The wages of sin is death, *but* the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Because we sin, we deserve death. God sent his Son, Jesus, to the earth. He lived a life without sin and died the death we deserve. Then God raised him from the dead! Jesus' death satisfied the price we owed for our sin.

And it's completely free. That's the definition of *grace*—a free and undeserved gift. This is hard for anyone to wrap their mind around, especially athletes. You work for everything in sports. Nothing is just given to you. There's a passage in Ephesians that helps us understand why God chose this route for relational intimacy with him:

“By grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Eph. 2:8–9).

So that no one may boast. God wants the glory.

You become a child of God—a Christian—when you respond to this gift by confessing with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believing in your heart that God raised him from the dead (Rom. 10:9). If you have never done that before, here is a sample prayer to express the desire of your heart to God:

God, I know I have sinned and fallen short of your glory. I understand that I can't make things right with you on my own. I need you. God, forgive me. Thank you for your Son, Jesus. I believe he paid the price for my sins on the cross. I believe he rose from the dead. I believe he is my Savior, and I want to make him Lord of my life too. Amen.

If you just expressed those words to God, I'd love to celebrate with you. You can connect with me through social media or my website, TheChristianAthlete.com, and let me know you just became a child of God.

When you do become a child of God, you gain the privilege of calling God your Father. And he gives you his Spirit to help as you walk forward in your new relationship with Jesus. He will never leave you.

Besides desiring his glory, this relational identity shows God's desire for you to enjoy him as Father. C. S. Lewis put it this way: “In

commanding us to glorify Him, God is inviting us to enjoy Him.”⁶ Athlete, God longs for us to find our ultimate satisfaction in him, not to search aimlessly for it through sports.

Against the backdrop of your primary identity as a child of the King, you can begin to glorify him through your secondary identity as an athlete. The order is crucial in how we approach glorifying God through sports.

Being a *Christian* athlete frees us to play, practice, and perform *from* love, not *for* love.

It empowers us to maximize our God-given talent *from* a position of acceptance, not *for* acceptance.



Against the backdrop of your primary identity as a child of the King, you can begin to glorify him through your secondary identity as an athlete.

Unbiblical Views of God—from the World of Sports

Without a biblical understanding of who God is and how he primarily sees us, we can easily default to an unhealthy view of him that inhibits our ability to fully glorify him.

The narrative we can drift toward believing is that God does not really care about sports. He may care about a lot of things, including us, but he is far too busy to be concerned with something as silly as a game. We imagine that God is concerned only about the platform that sports give us to share his love with other people. The danger

of this view of God is that it can ruin your motivation for playing. After all, if he doesn't care, why should you?

We see in the Gospel accounts that God pursues us relentlessly, even sending his Son to die for us. Moreover, the parables and stories, not to mention the rest of the New Testament, portray a God whose interest in us extends far beyond what we might call religious activities to include all of life.

Dr. Ed Uszynski, who has worked with elite athletes for the last three decades at the intersection of faith and sport, wrote:

A crucified yet victorious Christ should be proof enough that God doesn't operate with the same definitions of winning and losing as humans. But God most certainly does care who wins—just not at all in the same way we do and certainly not in the way implied by most post-game interviews. He cares about everything that happens in the universe. His sovereignty extends to the atomic level, where every atom of every cell arranges itself in relation to every other according to His plans and purposes.⁷

Perhaps Abraham Kuyper summed it up best when he said, “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry ‘Mine!’”⁸

The point is that God is not indifferent about anything that takes place within his universe—which includes how you play and

how you think about your sport. He cares about every detail of your life as an athlete.

As we continue to consider how sports can drive us closer to God, we need to leave our performance-based mindset in the rear-view mirror. This doesn't mean we should not strive to be the best we can be in our sport, only that competitive excellence is not the only (or even the primary) category God is concerned with when it comes to his glory. We need to start with what God prioritizes above all else: the heart.

Questions for Individual Reflection or Team Study

Did this chapter offer any new insights to you surrounding the word *glory*? If so, what?

Why do you think it's important to have a working definition of that word within the context of sports?

Why does God care so much about getting the glory?

What verses about God getting glory stood out to you? Did any surprise you?

Which of the three dangers most resonates with you? Why?

How did the author define "giving glory to God"?

Why do you think God wants to be viewed as a father?

If God wanted to be viewed as a fan, how would you bring him glory? What about if he were a coach? What if he were an owner? How does seeing him primarily as a father change how you give him glory?

How do you think your relationship, or lack thereof, with your own father impacts how you view God?

Are you a child of God? When did you make that decision to trust Jesus? If you haven't yet, what are some things preventing you from surrendering your life to him?

Additional Questions for Coaches to Consider

In what ways could understanding God's glory change how you interact with athletes?

Do you think God is currently being glorified through the way you coach? Why or why not?

What excites you about glorifying God in your coaching? What gives you hesitation?

Who have you seen best model this idea of "giving God glory"?

How could understanding that you have an opportunity every day to please God through the way you coach bring a new sense of purpose to your role?

Whether you asked for it or not, you play a parental role in the life of athletes. What do you need to do so your athletes see God's characteristics in you? What do you need to stop doing?

If God prioritizes heart posture over performance, how do you model this to your athletes? Is it possible to do both?

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