

COMPETITION OR COOPERATION?

BY WALTER S. HAMERSLOUGH

A Look at Sports and the Church

In 1976 the General Conference published the pamphlet *Guidelines for Activities With Elements of Competition*. The publication analyzes competition and rivalry from the viewpoint of the Scriptures and the Spirit of Prophecy and offers guidelines to minimize rivalrous competition in church activities. It also provides reasons why the church opposes an organized program of inter-school athletics and inter-church sports. These guidelines do not present a new philosophy but verbalize the traditional church position.

Seventh-day Adventists are familiar with many of the quotations from Ellen White concerning the dangers of sports. For example:

If in our school the land were more faithfully cultivated, the buildings more disinterestedly cared for by the students, the love of sports and amusements, which causes so much perplexity in our school work, would pass away.¹

I have not been able to find one instance where He [Christ] educated His disciples to engage in amusement of football or pugilistic games, to obtain physical exercise, or in theatrical performances.²

The exciting sports— theater going, horse-racing, gambling, liquor-drinking, and reveling—stimulate every passion to activity.³

However, Ellen White never uses the words *competition* or *rivalry* when referring to sport. She does counsel regarding competition and rivalry among physicians,⁴ or gospel workers,⁵ and between institutions,⁶ in household expenditure,⁷ and dress.⁸ However, Adventists today think almost exclusively—and negatively—about sports when they hear the terms *competition* and *rivalry*.

While the church officially opposes interorganizational sports (school versus school, church versus church), in fact, such activity has been a part of school and

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church activities for more than 25 years. More than 80 percent of the SDA colleges in North America, and at least 25 academies have some kind of sports program.⁹ In addition, numerous churches participate in softball, basketball, and bowling leagues. Why does this dichotomy exist between guidelines and reality?

Background

A look at sports in the late 1800s and some comparisons between life then and now give us some insight into the counsel given by Mrs. White, and allow us to apply to our own day the principles she taught.

With the urbanization of the United States after the Civil War, life changed dramatically. As people left the farms to find work in the cities, they had more leisure time, which they sought to fill with various amusements. Though sport had been popular before, during these years it began to grow rapidly until it became the national obsession we see today.

Some researchers have suggested that sport provided a means of managing urban tensions and maintaining order in the densely populated cities.¹⁰ However, as sports developed, they increasingly became connected with gambling and

violence.¹¹

Football became a national scandal whose future was threatened because its brutality resulted in numerous deaths. In 1909 30 players were killed and 219 injured. The sport was attacked by editors, legislators, and educators. Ministers and female orators saw football as corrupting American youth and ruining the goals of academic life. The president of the United States even threatened to ban the sport. Andrew Draper, then president of the University of Illinois, blasted football for fostering loafing, gambling, and drinking. Charles William Eliot, president of Harvard, charged that the undergraduate mind was too absorbed with the gridiron—the university ate, talked, and breathed football. He pleaded for help from the educated public.¹²

Horse racing and boxing, where fighters pounded each other senseless with bare knuckles, were also under the influence of gamblers. The billiard room and bowling alley became hangouts for criminals and gangs. Associated with gambling, liquor, smoking, and profanity, these places acquired an unsavory reputation.¹³

Little wonder, then, that Ellen White joined many others in recommending that church members avoid these activities and the inevitable consequences associated with cheating, drinking, game fixing, riotous behavior, and criminal influences.

Finding the Principles

We must recognize, however, that some of Ellen White's counsel is time, place, and person specific. It is important to identify the principles underlying such counsel and apply them to the circumstances of modern life. Two examples of time- and place-specific counsel are her advice regarding bicycles and race relations.

The bicycle craze was at its height between 1893 and 1896 when there were close to four million riders in the U.S. Early models cost as much as \$125, a great deal of money at a time when people earned only a few dollars a week, and the country was suffering from a severe depression.¹⁴ Races, parades, and exhibitions were popular, and the bicycle helped shape dress styles, social life, and recreational activities. Critics charged that bicycles led women and innocent girls into ruin and disgrace and forced them to assume an immodest posture, while the bicycle costume popular with the ladies invited lewd remarks.¹⁵ In the late 1890s Ellen White cautioned that ministers should not spend their money on bicycles¹⁶ and that "the exhibitions in the bicycle craze are an offense to God."¹⁷

Today this advice sounds strange, as bicycles have become an economical, efficient form of transportation. Whole families enjoy the exercise they gain cycling together on Sabbath afternoons.

Race Relations

Ellen White wrote that "We are not to agitate the color line question, and thus arouse prejudice and bring about a crisis." "Let white and colored people be labored for in separate, distinct lines." "The colored people should not urge that they be placed on an equality with white people."¹⁸

Certainly Ellen White would not voice this counsel in the 1980s. Conditions have changed, and were she living today, she might well be a champion of civil rights.

As we read the prophet's writings, we must analyze her statements in the light of the conditions when the counsel was given and, using the principles underlying the advice, make a modern application.

I would like to suggest that a similar situation exists in the 1980s with regard to sport. That is, the concentration of people in cities, life-style, location of schools, and other factors have changed

so dramatically from the 1800s that in certain situations a limited and carefully controlled sports program is an acceptable option.

School Life in Ellen White's Day

In the early days of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, most schools were located in rural areas. Life was simple and people worked hard to make a living. Farming and other industries in our schools required manual labor. Exercise was obtained through work, and people had little leisure time. Because of the isolated nature of our schools, young people knew little of the outside world, and remained relatively isolated from temptation.

The typical educational program in the 1980s is vastly different from what it was a hundred years ago. Students now live at home and ride the bus, or perhaps even drive their own cars to school. Most schools are located in large metropolitan areas. Schools typically operate only about six hours a day. Few students work at jobs that demand hard manual labor or provide beneficial exercise. Home chores are few, and with the help of modern appliances such as vacuum cleaners and dishwashers, not physically demanding. As a result, most young people get little exercise and have several hours of leisure time each day.

Opportunities for amusement in the city are legion. In fact, it is hard for schools to plan functions in which students will participate, for many would rather attend movies, concerts, amusement parks, bowling alleys, parties, or just cruise the streets. Young people are constantly exposed to, and encouraged to experiment with tobacco, alcohol, and drugs. The challenge of being a dedicated Seventh-day Adventist teenager in 1988 is indeed a difficult one.

Students are constantly bombarded by the media. Newspapers, magazines by the score, radios in every room and car (and on every pair of ears), television, and videos are everywhere. Cable TV brings all manner of sports and other entertainment into our homes.

Many church members attend professional sports, watch games on TV, and participate in bowling leagues and golf tournaments. Like other Americans, Adventists are often "armchair quarterbacks."

In the midst of all this, dedicated teachers have the awesome responsibility of making Christian education both relative to, and highly regarded by a secular society. Enrollments have plummeted in many schools, and substantial numbers of parents feel that our schools do not offer academic excellence or sufficient breadth of opportunities for their children.¹⁹

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Sports and Positive Life-styles

As we will see there are some ways that we can use sports to promote positive images and life-styles. Adventist publications frequently feature famous sports personalities on their covers, and highlight ways that such athletes have witnessed for Christ or for a life-style that the church promotes.

In 1986 the *Adventist Review* reported that Symon Burgher, a highly skilled English soccer player, has attracted considerable attention because he will not play on Sabbath. A recent issue of the *Review* told the story of John Bunn, the only SDA who has been inducted into the Basketball Hall of Fame. Bunn has found numerous opportunities to teach Christian principles to his players and to witness to non-SDAs. These and other athletes have used their sport to promote the gospel.

Our youth departments frequently sponsor track meets. Churches organize softball teams for their members. These teams compete in city or church leagues. Many local church leaders feel that these events are an important part of their outreach programs and provide wholesome recreational activities for their members. School and college faculties, local school and college boards, conference and union committees have all approved interschool sports if a school thought its

students would benefit from the program and it could be administered in an acceptable manner.

Witness to Non-SDAs

Lee Erickson, athletic director at Pacific Christian College, a 500-student non-denominational school in Fullerton, California, sponsored by the Christian Churches, suggests that sports would help the Seventh-day Adventist Church. "We really don't know you; you pretty much keep to yourself and don't interact much with other colleges. We know about your hospital in Loma Linda and the heart transplants but that's about all. It would be good for us to get to know you through the sports medium, to fellowship and pray together. After all, don't we all serve the same God?"

Several years ago, La Sierra Academy attempted to enter a Christian high school league in Southern California. They were turned down, as league administrators thought that the Seventh-day Adventist Church was a cult and not evangelical. After Randy Norton, physical-education instructor at the academy, seized this opportunity to witness and explain the church's position, the academy was accepted into the league. All of the league administrators are now strong supporters of the academy.

Successful Programs

A number of SDA schools with strong sports programs are doing well. Their attendance is increasing or remaining steady. School spirit is high and students, teachers, and parents have not only positive feelings toward their school, but support them as well. Where interschool sports are part of the program, the majority seem pleased with the results.

W. G. Nelson, principal at Shenandoah Valley Academy,²⁰ at first felt uncomfortable with the school's sports program. However, he decided to take a wait-and-see attitude. After carefully observing the sports activities, Nelson became a strong supporter of the program. He sees it as an important part of the curriculum and believes it should continue.

Administrators Dr. John Wagner and Dr. William Loveless, presidents respectively of Union and Columbia Union colleges, are strong supporters of their sports programs. They feel that the opportunities to associate with non-SDA Christians in an athletic contest provide an avenue for outreach and sharing of positive life-styles.

The above examples and numerous other testimonials that could be given provide an answer to the criticism that sports are a negative force and will cause the demise of the Adventist educational system. On the contrary, they seem to be

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able facilities and equipment. However, teachers must seek to broaden their programs to include new activities and exercises. In that way, physical education will offer something interesting for every student. Young people should receive a well-rounded program that includes fitness, sports and games, and recreational activities.

Scheduling

Fitness education can be incorporated into the program on a daily basis or interspersed throughout the week as scheduling and emphasis permit. Many schools have such short class periods that cardio-vascular benefit may be difficult to achieve. However, fitness principles can be presented and activities outside of class can be planned to encourage students to maintain their own fitness schedule. School-sponsored runs can be planned to include the community and may even serve as fundraisers. Weekend workshops or sports days can offer the opportunity for fellowship with other young people as well as lectures and recreation activities.

Sports and games lend themselves well to the physical education class since most students enjoy the activities and are at an age when they are testing their physical strength and skills. Intramurals give the students an opportunity to increase their skills and have fun playing with friends. Tournaments and competitions can be included in the intramural program, or can be scheduled as special events.

In some cases, the students with more advanced skills may enjoy participating in carefully supervised interscholastic programs with nearby academies, in local Christian leagues, or under the direction of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes organization. These activities give participants a sense of working together toward a goal, and inspire enthusiasm and school spirit for all students.

Physical education classes should introduce recreational activities and games that help familiarize students with active pursuits in which they can engage after they finish school or with their families. This will help them make a commitment to a healthy life-style.

The challenges are clear. We must

Physical education teachers need to know more than how to teach calisthenics and coach intramurals.

seek and implement solutions that help our students recognize the importance of fitness to their mental and spiritual well-being. Through *study and partnership with Christ*, we can help our students achieve this goal. □

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a helpful addition to many school programs.

The church has updated the presentation of the gospel so as to appeal to modern-day people. Over the years, our ministry has changed its preaching style, music, activities, and use of the media. We must be open to new ways of doing things, recognizing that change is not necessarily bad. Change must take place so that we can relate to the modern generation of young people. We want our church and schools to be places they will want to attend.

When we try to define the difference between Adventist schools and public institutions, we must look at more than mere academics. After all, public schools offer math and English, so do we. However, we offer a curriculum in a Christian setting. We seek to integrate religion into each part of the curriculum. Why cannot we offer sport in a Christian setting? Our young people are bombarded with sports; there is no practical way this can be avoided. It is imperative that we teach them how to relate to sport in a Christian way. They need to learn that sport is only a small part of their life and not an all-consuming passion.

There is an enormous difference between sports at the University of Kansas or the University of Maryland or UCLA and

the sports offered at a small Christian college. Most Adventists know sport only as they read about it in the newspaper or watch events on television. This is *not* Christian sport. Christian sport can be operated without unethical recruiting, illegal drugs, or a win-at-all-costs philosophy. There need be no cheating so that players can remain eligible, no glorification of individuals or teams.

The sports program can be part of the curriculum, just like the band, choir, orchestra, gymnastic team, newspaper, or student government. It is neither more nor less important. Our schools are not trying to win national championships. Competition need not lead to rivalry. It can be a *striving together*; it need not lead to unfriendliness or hostility. It can remain simply, competition, which is not inherently evil.

The key to a successful sports program is competent leadership. We must have coaches who emphasize the thrill of participation, the challenge of doing one's best. We should be known as Christians in our play as well as in our religion. Our players offer a hand to an opponent who has fallen; we do not heckle officials or opposing players when they are making a free throw. We applaud good play—ours and theirs. Our players—and spectators—should exhibit the best sportsmanship of any school or church. By so doing, our schools will epitomize a Christian model of sports.

Not every school needs a sports program. One should be implemented only if a need exists, and if leadership is available to keep the program in proper perspective. The program must be evaluated periodically to see if its goals and objectives are being met. It may be helpful to establish review committees in various parts of the country to examine each program to determine whether it should be revised or discontinued.

We must proceed slowly and carefully, ever keeping before us the goals of Christian education. With constant, fervent prayer we can keep Christ foremost in interorganizational sports and provide another avenue that will lead many into a Spirit-filled life and ultimately into the kingdom of heaven. □

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²⁰ Dr. Nelson has just accepted the position of assistant academic vice-president at Southwestern Adventist College, Keene, Texas.

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have as its educational base and mode of daily operation a commitment to each student with a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. Without this objective, we have no justification for involvement in sports. The program must exist to show Adventist young people that Jesus Christ can be the Lord of their life in all their pursuits, even in the gym or on the playing field.

Where will such a philosophy lead? It may very likely provide an opportunity to meet and participate in games with students from other schools. In this setting, visiting students are exposed to Christianity in an atmosphere of caring and sharing. For this to take place, time outside of the game environment must be provided for students to develop relationships with visiting players.

As a result, the pursuit of excellence can occur within a perspective of care and mutual respect, and students will use sport as a tool of personal Christian growth and Christian outreach.

The definition of success is critical to any discussion of sport and com-

petition. If success is defined as winning, then it follows that a win-at-any-price ethic will ultimately evolve. Opponents are seen as enemies, and players commit themselves to the absolute goal of winning. Success becomes a "cult" with violence and human destruction as potential by-products. This type of "success" has been demonstrated far too often in society.

But there is a way to define success in the world of sport so that Christians can compete with balance and perspective. This will require a new sport ethic that is built from the ground up; one that places a "premium on the Christian distinctiveness of submitting ends to means, product to process, quantity to quality, caring for self to caring for others."²¹

Competition and cooperation must be evaluated in the light of the human consequences that they produce. Competition can be positive if it is combined with perspective about the ultimate object of the participation and the relative importance of winning and losing. Sport within a Christian perspective can become a stimulating challenge to the minds and bodies of our young people, "a mutual quest for excellence in the face of challenge."²²

A Christian perspective of sport precludes adherence to the gospel according to Vince Lombardi, which defines success as winning. Instead, it should be built upon Berton Brayley's "Prayer of a Sportsman," which says, "If I should lose, let me stand by the side of the road and cheer as the winners go by."²³

Sport can and should be played as an expression of Christian sentiment.²⁴ As such it becomes an opportunity to celebrate one's relationship with Jesus Christ through movement. As musicians and artists express themselves through the medium of song and sculpture, so Christian athletes can express themselves through the medium of sport. For, as God has given the gift of teaching and preaching, of singing and sculpting, He has just as surely given the gift of running and jumping, of skipping and walking.

The challenge before the church and its educational leaders today is not to tell our young people to "go behind the power plant," but to give

leadership and direction; to provide priority and purpose; to acknowledge that playing fields, gymnasiums, and pools are laboratories in which positive changes take place in human beings. In this way, we will help our students cultivate their talents and enable them to encounter another dimension in their growing relationship with Jesus Christ, the Author of all human movement.²⁵ □

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