

'Play up, play on, for the Lord'

FAITH IN SPORT

Fr Vlad Felzmann

Fr Vlad Felzmann continues his look at the links between Christianity and sport through the ages

Throughout history, every generation has had to face its threats. In the 19th century, the industrial revolution, like global warming today, was seen as a threat to health. Thus, throughout Europe and the USA wise – including Christian – minds looked for ways to improve physical health. Exercises and sport, as well as going to the seaside to get clean air and a swim – called by some as 'vitalism' – came into 19th century lives.

Athleticism took centre stage in Victorian public schools. Organised games were introduced in part to counteract the effect of less wholesome leisure activities of public schoolboys such as stone throwing, poaching, bird nesting and, at Marlborough, beating frogs to death. But also, against a general background of vandalism and indiscipline, it was a potent means of social control, character firming and improving physical fitness.

In the mid-nineteenth century, a movement called 'Muscular Christianity', characterised by a belief in patriotic duty, discipline, self-sacrifice, masculinity, and the moral and physical beauty of athleticism, was born in England. This movement aimed at helping Christians pay more attention to their bodies and give more value to the physical world. It seems to have been a 'necessary correction' as Protestant Christians began rejecting a dualistic theology that pitted the physical (bad) and spiritual (good) against one another. Of course, it was not without its flaws. Muscular Christianity's early critics joked that it "redefined a saint as one who can walk a thousand miles in a thousand hours."

In schools, it is most often associated with English author Thomas Hughes and his 1857 novel *Tom Brown's School Days*, as well as in the works of writers Charles Kingsley and Ralph Connor. American President Theodore Roosevelt was raised in a household that practised muscular Christianity and was a prominent adherent to the movement.

Some say that muscular Christianity can be traced back to Paul the Apostle, who used athletic metaphors to describe the challenges of a Christian life.



Goodison Park, home of Everton. The ground has a church partially within the perimeter and, as such, the club 'does not play early matches on Sunday to avoid clashing with the services of the church.'

However, the explicit advocacy of sport and exercise in Christianity did not appear until 1762, when Rousseau's *Emile* described physical education as important for the formation of moral character.

In the USA, many Protestant Christians in the 18th and early 19th centuries saw sport as a dangerous leisure activity likely to distract Christians from church and tempt them with vices like gambling, alcohol, womanising, and violence. Many states passed laws banning the playing of sports on Sundays, demonstrating the idea that sport contradicted and perhaps undermined Christian priorities.

So what changed? How did the United States move from its stance of seeing religion and sport as contradictory to a stance of seeing religion and sport as compatible – perhaps even mutually beneficial?

One answer to this question is the migration of muscular Christianity to the USA.

In the USA, the industrial revolution is bracketed by the end of the Civil War (1865) and the end of WWI (1919). The ushering in of industry shortened the work week, brought people into closer proximity, and lessened the demands of physical labour. All of those factors gave Christians more time and more energy that needed to be expended. People had time on their hands and money to spend. In the history of sport, the industrial revolution is a significant inflection point. It paved the way for sport to become more than play or military training, or even resting of the mind. It became a structured and organised business.

There, in the USA, many Jews and Catholics embraced sports in order to demonstrate – to the

dominant Protestant establishment – that they were capable of becoming fully American. For example, Jews developed the Young Men's Hebrew Association, modelled on muscular Christianity's YMCA. Through these activities, American Jews sought to negotiate between preserving their values of intellectualism and community, while concurrently engaging in the embodied and often individualistic project of sports.

However, anti-Semitism was boosted by the Black Sox Scandal of 1919, a Major League Baseball game-fixing scandal in which eight members of the Chicago White Sox were accused of throwing the 1919 World Series against the Cincinnati Reds in exchange for money from a gambling syndicate led by Arnold Rothstein.

Prominent Americans like Henry Ford blamed the Jewish gamblers who organised the corruption more than the players who participated in it. Ford – a friend of Adolf Hitler – publicly argued that Jews were ruining America by undermining its pastime of baseball.

YMCA, originally called the Young Men's Christian Association, founded on 6th June 1844 by George Williams in London, aimed to put Christian values into practice by developing a healthy "body, mind, and spirit". Williams, a worker in the drapery trade in London, concerned about the welfare of his fellow workers, started a prayer and Bible study group, which evolved into the YMCA.

In the USA, Dr. Luther Gulick (1865-1918), an early leader of the YMCA, believed the gym could be a place of spiritual formation. Eager to learn under Gulick's tutelage, James Naismith, a Canadian-

American (1861-1939) moved to Springfield, Illinois in 1890 and joined Gulick at the YMCA. Gulick asked Naismith to create a new game that would be void of the violence and roughness that existed in most games at the time. In 1891, Naismith came up with the sport of basketball.

In England, the first and closest links between church and the founding of sporting from football. Following the adoption of the rules of football and the advent of the Football Association in England, a number of churches founded football clubs. One of the first was Everton, founded in 1879 at St. Domingo's Methodist Church. Its pastor, Rev Ben Chambers, was an advocate of muscular Christianity, encouraging healthy minds and healthy bodies. Everton's Goodison Park ground has a church partially within the perimeter and, as such, does not host early matches on Sunday to avoid clashing with services.

In the same year, Fulham St Andrew's Church Sunday School FC – to later become Fulham F.C. – was founded by members of the nearby Church of England church for members of the Sunday school with the same focus as Everton, in advocating muscular Christianity.

In November 1880, St Mark's Anglican Church in the West Gorton area of Manchester, inspired by the same ideology and looking to win young men back to the church, set up a football team: this later became Manchester City.

Across the whole of Britain there was a race to follow suit. St. Mary's Church, Southampton, set up a team in 1885, which later became Southampton Football Club. On 6th November 1887, the Celtic Football Club was founded

at the Catholic St. Mary's Church Hall in Calton as a way to fight poverty in East Glasgow. Their Glasgow neighbours Rangers F.C. later became associated with the Protestant section of Glasgow, leading to the Old Firm rivalry and, sadly, giving an outlet for sectarianism between Scotland's Protestants and Catholics.

Arsenal FC moved to Arsenal Stadium in 1913 on ground leased from St John's College of Divinity. The lease conditions stated that there would be no matches played on holy days and no 'intoxicating liquor' sold at the stadium. However, these stipulations were dropped after Arsenal bought the ground outright in 1925.

In Northern Ireland, Christianity plays a strong role in football. Until 2008, the Sabbatarianism of the Protestant majority and the Sunday Observance Act 1695 banned football on Sundays, including by the Northern Ireland national team. "The Belfast club, Linfield FC, even now maintains its ban on playing on Sundays.

The ongoing question of whether or not sports should be played on Sunday continues to be a significant theological priority that did not come closer to a resolution. The nuanced discussion around the Sunday Sabbath included theology, geographic location, race, and class. World War I was even a significant factor in the Sabbath discussion because "compared to the dangers of war, Sunday sport seemed innocuous".

In case you wondered, when Cambridge United met Oldham Athletic at the Abbey Stadium in the FA Cup on 6th January 1974, we saw the first-ever professional football match played on a Sunday.