

SECTION ONE: Introduction

Several years ago I served as the Minister of Education for a small church just outside of Fort Worth, Texas. One of my responsibilities was to organize the weekly community outreach program called, "Visitation." Every Tuesday night, our church members would visit the homes of people who were considered prospects for church membership, but were not currently attending the church. It was a program with merit, but it caused me a great deal of anxiety.

I am a Christian, and I believe in evangelism. I believe as Christians we must take the message of Christ to the lost people of the world. So, why did I have such a problem with visitation? Each week, I would dread getting into the car, and on some occasions I would hope that no one would come to the door when I knocked. Our church neighborhood had changed over the years. Now the streets were filled with the houses of people who were different than me. At times, I felt that everyone in the community was either Spanish speaking or over the age of 100. I was neither. I could not speak Spanish, and I knew very little about the life of a senior citizen. I had no connection with my community. But, I had the message of Christ that need to be delivered.

The R & R of Sports Ministry

No. I am not talking about rest and relaxation. Sports ministry is about relevance and relationships. I learned this through my struggles with community visitation. In my guilt of believing that I should desire to do outreach, but knowing that I did not like to go to strangers homes, I would leave visitation and go to a local gym. It became a weekly Tuesday night ritual. I would go to the gym to play basketball and

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work out the stress of my post-visitation guilt. I love basketball, and each week I would get on the court with friends and strangers just to play the game. There would always be people at the gym I did not know. Sometimes I would play with them, sometimes I would play against them, and there were even times that I would swap sweat with them by setting a pick or trying to block them out! It didn't matter, because it was basketball. I was playing the game I loved and I was meeting new people.

It took me almost a year of basketball guilt therapy to make a connection between evangelism and common interest. I loved basketball and I was in the gym with others who loved basketball. That connection opened the door for conversations, competition, a sense of community, and opportunities for me to demonstrate my character and beliefs. I realized that other people shared my interest in basketball. That common interest opened the door for relationships. I soon found that those new relationships were platforms for sharing the love of Christ. This discovery was my introduction to sports evangelism. God showed me that He had given me specific skills and interests that I could use to establish relationships and accomplish His purpose for my life. Without guilt!

FOCUS POINT

Let's stop for a minute and clarify what Scripture says about evangelism and the purpose for our lives. Read Matthew 28:16-20.

What are the three commands included in the Great Commission?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Jesus gave specific commands about the priorities of the life and actions of His people. Whether it is in a church, the office, or on a sports field, the three commands of the Great Commission always apply. We are to, "go and make disciples, baptize them, and teach them to observe God's commands." God has established a clear purpose for our lives, and it is important for us to remember that purpose when we are talking about specific interest ministries, such as sports evangelism. As we seek to be relevant, as we work and play, we are not excused from our God given purpose to make disciples, baptize them and teach them.

SECTION TWO: A Purposeful Tool

I have been involved with Christian sports clinics that employed coaches and players of the highest level in competitive sports. These professionals had a passion for their sport, and they had given of their time to use their sport as tool for sharing the Gospel with children and aspiring young athletes. The intent of these clinicians was pure. However, in many cases, it became clear that their tool was more of a focus than their original purpose.

One coach spent more than ten minutes explaining and re-explaining proper stance for swinging a bat. The ten year old he was addressing, just wanted to swing the bat and soon got frustrated. The coach was accustomed to practice sessions that were designed to make better baseball players and ultimately win games. In the Christian sports clinic, however, the purpose was to use sports as a tool for engaging the participants so that they would be open to hear the Gospel. The tool took precedence over the purpose. The boy was frustrated and closed to any other presentation.

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Sin leads to spiritual death, and eternal life can only be found in Christ (Romans 6:23). The people we meet who do not know Jesus are dead in sin, and they need Jesus so that they may have life. Sports is a useful tool that we can use to help people see Jesus, and ultimately accomplish the commands of the Great Commission.

Let's clarify our perspective of tool versus need. Imagine you are building a birdhouse. First, you cut four pieces of wood for the walls. Second you cut a square for the floor and a slightly larger square for the roof. You attach all of the pieces with nails, paint the birdhouse, and hang it from a tree.

Is the birdhouse complete? Will it accomplish its purpose of housing a bird? No, because you didn't make a hole for the bird to get in. No problem. Take down the house, and make a hole. What do you need, a drill, a saw, a woodpecker? No. Those things are all just tools (or a bird). Any of them could be used to accomplish the task, but they are not the need. The need is a hole! The tool doesn't matter. The bird needs a way into the house. It doesn't care if you used a drill or your fingernail to make that way.

We know that lost people need a way to Jesus, and we believe that we can help them find that way through common interests like sports. The idea of using something we enjoy to establish relationships for evangelism is exciting. The potential problem arises when our passion for our interest gets in the way of our focus on our purpose. The tool becomes more important than the needed task. In sports, competition can lead to angry outbursts. Desiring to keep play challenging can lead to exclusionism. Wanting to play can lead to missing God's opportunities. Finally, concentrating on our own level of participation can lead to ignoring other people.

FOCUS POINT

Are you using the tool or just playing the game?

1. Does competition bring out the best or the worst in you?
2. Do you feel like you have to play against a certain level of competition just to keep it challenging and worthwhile?
3. In casual play, do you make an effort to just play with friends and avoid playing with strangers?
4. When you are at a field or gym, do you just focus on the action, or do you ever look around and try to see what God's activity might be in the lives of people around you?

SECTION THREE: An Effective and Efficient Tool

Then He said to His disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into His harvest field."

Matthew 9:37-38 NIV

Jesus made it clear that we have but one purpose. We are to be laborers who go out into the world to reap the harvest. We have claimed in this lesson that sports can be a tool used to accomplish that purpose, and that the tool should never take precedence over the purpose. So, what makes sports evangelism an effective and efficient tool for ministry? You have a limited amount of resources available to you, and you want to be a good steward of those resources. The last thing you want is to waste your time and money on the next highly publicized fad. Your desire is to acquire a tool that helps you to accomplish your purpose without overextending your resources.

The Effectiveness of Sports Missions

Universal Popularity. The popularity of sports establishes it as a ministry tool that can be used to engage a wide range of people regardless of age, gender, socio-economic status, or other social differences. If you want to gauge the sports interest of your church membership, then ask any group in the church the following three questions. In your questions, include recreational activities as sports, i.e. walking, aerobics, ultimate Frisbee. You will find that your church members are sports minded, and you will find a common interest among them. A common interest they share with the world.

1. How many in your church group have participated in a sport in the last week?
2. How many in your church group have watched a sport in person or on television in the last week?
3. How many in your church group currently have a spouse or child participating in a sport on a weekly basis?

A TRIVIA CHALLENGE

Question. What are the only two events that draw the entire world together through representatives meeting together and media broadcasts?

Answer. The Olympics and the World Cup of Soccer. Yes. They are both sporting events, and each competition has more than 200 countries involved. We have a tool in sports evangelism that links us to the lost people of our local communities and our world community.

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Universal Language. These days I don't know whether being called, "phat" is a compliment or a cut down. My grandmother keeps telling me that she is "fixin ta" do things, but I am never sure what is broken. The truth is that there are times when it seems that we are all speaking English and yet we do not understand each other. The local church has had difficulty communicating with a lost world using terms like, "born again," "washed in the blood," and "redeemed." Unless you grew up in the church, these terms can be confusing and at times unattractive.

Sports is a tool that can cut through language barriers. Wherever you go in this world, the first one to cross the finish line wins. When you kick a ball past another person into their goal more times than you allow them to kick the ball past you into your goal, you have won a soccer, or futbol game. Finally, everywhere in the world, basketball goals are supposed to be 10 feet high. Although, that example is not always true.

If you are looking for a way to communicate with a group of students in your community, or with the masses in your city, you can be sure that sports is a language spoken by everyone.

Perceived Need. In his book, *The Purpose Driven Church*, Rick Warren states that the best way to reach lost people is to follow the model of Jesus. He addressed the felt needs of the people. Jesus understood that the eternal penalty of unforgiven sin was greater than illness or disease. However, the people who came to Him for help, felt that their greatest need was for physical healing.

Sports can provide a tool for you to meet the felt needs of lost people in your community. You may have an open gym, sports equipment, a large field, or financial resources that people in your community covet for the sake of the ability to participate

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in activities they enjoy. One local church saw that high school football was king in their community. People flocked to the stadiums to see the games, and parents loved to cheer for their boys as they played. The church began video taping the games and showing the replays on large screens at the church. Athletes came to see themselves play, and parents came out to cheer them on again.

People can be passionate about sports and fitness, and perceive great personal need for the ability to participate and excel. You understand that if they are lost, that their greatest need is to have their sins forgiven. By addressing their felt need for participation, you can open the door for greater opportunities to address their urgent need for Jesus.

A COMMUNITY ASSESSMENT

1. What is the most popular sport or sporting activity in your community?
Basketball, soccer, aerobics, golf, etc.
2. What resources are available in your church to provide lost people your opportunity to participate in the activities they enjoy within a Christian environment? A gymnasium, money for better league equipment or sponsorship, Christian coaches for lessons, etc.
3. What group of people could you better connect with through the language of sports? Youth with extreme sports, senior adults with fitness activities, men with fishing or golf, etc.

Desire for Fun. Yes, fun. The number one reason for the effectiveness of sports ministry is the desire of people to have a good time. Some people love the

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battle of competition and some people just love to play. Having fun is attractive and it is contagious. There is no need for a detailed scientific explanation of the positive aspects of having fun. People simply like it.

There is no limit to the ways you can schedule and organize activities to provide youth and families opportunities to just have a good time through sporting events. The only limitation is not trying. You can schedule all night sport marathons, matches between church staff and the youth, or evenings for families to attend local games together. If you are more adventurous, you can follow the example of one church in Texas, and plan your own rodeo with a pie baking contest on the side. There is something exhilarating about seeing big-talking teenage boys with their faces planted in the mud. Now, that's fun!

The Efficiency of Sports Ministry

According to Webster's Dictionary, the word efficient means, "capable of producing desired effects," and "productive without waste." I don't know about you, but I like accomplishing my goals, and I don't like wasting my time, my money, or my energy. I cannot count the number of emails and mailings I receive offering the next greatest plan or product to make my life better. The problem with most is that what they can provide does not match my goals. The second problem is cost. I have limited resources, and the reason I receive promotions is because whoever sent me the promotion usually wants a lot of money in return for their product or service, which may or may not accomplish my goals. So, why is sports evangelism any different? Here is the list.

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Popularity: As we have already mentioned, the popularity of sports is the foundation of sports ministry. Instead of wasting time trying to find out how to attract people to your programs, you can work within an activity where the people are already gathering.

Proximity: Because of the popularity of sports, you are able to be with people. Relationships are built by relating to people. Sports evangelism puts you with the people, whether you are going to them, or they are coming to you.

Simplicity: Having fun is not hard. Rolling a ball into a field or unlocking a gym door is not difficult. There are details and planning involved with sports evangelism, but the ministry concept is simple.

Multiplicity: Because sports evangelism is not difficult, it is easy to replicate. If you meet a student playing ultimate Frisbee in the park and lead them through the process of becoming a Christian, your next step is to send them back out as a witness. Do you need a 13 week program for teaching them to do door to door evangelism? No. You simply send them back to the park to follow the example they saw you model.

Activity: Sports evangelism is built around activity and participation. There is not a lot of wasted talk or committee meetings in sports evangelism, unless you put them there. People like to play. Sports evangelism facilitates involvement of both Christians and non-Christians evangelistic situations.

Opportunity: Sports evangelism brings Christians and non-Christians together in a non-threatening environment. Conversations about sports and games can lead to conversations about life and Christ. Circumstances and events in sports can lead

to teachable moments. God uses the talents and interests of Christians to create opportunities for His work.

Adaptability: Sports evangelism can easily be used to support many different types of ministry activities. You can use sports ministry to engage new people, enlist people not currently involved in church ministries, provide opportunities for direct evangelism, and create small group settings for discipleship. It can be used for one on one or team based activities. It is not age or gender specific. I guess in the most scientific evaluation, sports evangelism is the duct tape of ministry. You always need to have it in your tool box, because you never know what need or opportunity might arise.

FOCUS POINT

List four of the seven qualities that make sports evangelism an efficient ministry tool. Explain each of your answers with at least one sentence explaining why the quality makes sports evangelism an efficient tool for ministry.

SECTION FOUR: The Applications of Sports Evangelism

Have you ever seen a home improvement show on television? Does it bother you when the host of the show introduces a project like completely restoring a one hundred year old house and says, "This is not the easiest project, but if we can do it, you can do it." Your first thought is, how? They have a huge budget, the experience, and lots of tools that you do not have. They have tools that you didn't know existed, much less how to use them. How can you do the project? Even if you had the tools,

and you knew what you wanted to do with them, how would you cross the gap between start and finish?

To help you avoid that frustration with sports evangelism, here is a list of ways that you can use the tool of sports. The list is broken down into three categories; target groups of sports evangelism, places where sports evangelism can be used, and types of sports evangelism projects. These lists are not comprehensive. They are designed to be a starting point for your brainstorming about how you can best use sports in your ministry setting.

Target Groups of Sports Evangelism

(These groups can be reached by church outreach. They can be ministered to by a youth group or Sunday School class. They can also be served one on one in a peer to peer ministry setting.)

1. Athletes of all ages, sports, activities and interests.
2. Coaches of all ages, sports, activities and interests.
3. Children.
4. Parents of those participating in sports and recreation activities.
5. Sports teams.
6. Fans at sporting events and recreational activities.
7. The underprivileged, immigrants and refugees.
8. Students.
9. The handicapped or disabled.
10. Senior citizens.

FOCUS POINT

List 5 target groups that could be possible targets of your sports evangelism ministry.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Places where Sports Evangelism Can be Used

1. School and University campuses.
2. Local church facilities, i.e. gymnasiums, parking lots and fields.
3. Community centers and local parks.
4. Multi-Housing Units.
5. Beaches and lakes.
6. Tournament or league sites.
7. Domestic mission sites.
8. International mission sites.

Sports Project Types

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1. Adventure and Extreme Sports | 9. Sports Construction |
| 2. Church Program Support | 10. Sports Chaplaincy |
| 3. Coaching and Sports Education | 11. Sports for the Disabled |
| 4. Engagement Projects | 12. League and Team Development |
| 5. Exhibitions and Friendship Games | 13. Sports Event Ministry |

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6. Recreation and Games

14. Materials Distribution

7. Sports Medicine/Athletic Training

15. Tournaments and Tours

8. Sports Camps and Clinics

16. Youth Led Sports Projects

FOCUS POINT

Can you match sports project types and places they can be used?

Make a list of three types of sports project types. With each type of project, list at least two places where it could be used.

1.

2.

3.

SECTION SEVEN: A SPORTS MINISTRY LEADERSHIP TOOL

Developing an Action Plan for Sports Missions

Step One: The Purpose

Why are you using sports missions? Why are you doing what you are doing and asking others to help you do it? List the long-term goals of your work including who you are trying to reach.

Step Two: The Plan

What are you going to do and *When* are you going to do it? Describe what types of sports projects you are going to use to accomplish your purpose.

Step Three: The People

Who is going to do the sports mission work? Create a list of what personnel are needed to accomplish your purpose.

Step Four: The Process

How are you going to accomplish your purpose? Describe how you are going to plan, prepare, implement and follow-up on your sports mission work.

Step Five: The Performance

How well will you do what you do? Describe the ways you will evaluate and control the stewardship and quality of your sports mission work.

Step Six: The Projects

Doing sports mission work. Develop specific plans for the sports projects you will use to accomplish your purpose.

SECTION EIGHT: SPORTS MINISTRY LEADERSHIP ASSESSMENT

Question One: What are the two R's of sports ministry? Briefly describe how each of these qualities can make sports ministry valuable to your ministry.

(Answer: Relevance and Relationship. Descriptions should include opportunities to be relevant to target group and opportunities to initiate and nurture relationships through sports activities.)

Question Two: Describe the difference between using sports activities to support your ministry and planning sports programs that include a few ministry activities. Give examples.

(Answer should include a description of the priority that Christian ministry has above sport. Examples should demonstrate a use of sports to directly support or accomplish desired ministry objectives.)

Question Three: List two characteristics of sports ministry that could make your ministry more effective. Briefly describe how you can take advantage of these characteristics.

(Answers include: universal popularity, universal language, perceived need, and fun. The descriptions should provide specific explanations of how two of the characteristics could be used by the minister to engage a target group with the Gospel or provide them with discipleship training.)

Question Four: List and describe three reasons why sports ministry is an efficient ministry method. Include examples of why sports activities could be a good use of your current ministry resources.

(Answers include: popularity, proximity, simplicity, multiplicity, activity, opportunity and adaptability. Descriptions should include explanations of the minister's resources and efficient uses of those resources through sports to achieve ministry goals.)

Question Five: List two target groups of your ministry, where you can engage them with sports ministry, and types of sports projects that you could use to reach them in those places.

(Answer should include a logical use of examples from the sports project list to accomplish specific ministry objectives with two specific ministry targets. The descriptions should show a priority of the ministry purpose over the sports activities.)