



Stephen Boshart

# The spiritual significance of sports

What we do with our bodies affects our souls, for good or ill

By Kevin Birnbaum

Sports have a way of unleashing ... let's say passionate behavior. Think soccer riots, screaming Little League parents, and such sentiments as "The Seahawks are gonna *kill* the Packers!"

Considered in the light of Christ, this all starts to seem a bit problematic. But how often do we actually look at sports through the lens of faith? Beyond the fact that Catholic high schools and universities are often athletic powerhouses, what does the Catholic faith really have to do with sports, or sports with the life of faith?

More than you might think, according to Jesuit Father Patrick Kelly. Because the human person is a unity of body and soul, sports have a profound power to shape us, "both for good and for ill," he said. Done right, athletics can be a school of human formation for young people, even preparing them "to live the discipline of the Christian life."

Father Kelly is an associate professor of theology and religious studies at Seattle University, where he teaches courses like "Sport and Spirituality" and "The Soul of Sport: An Interdisciplinary Inquiry," incorporating philosophy, psychology, theology and spirituality.

His interest in sports is not merely academic. He grew up playing CYO sports, football and basketball at Catholic schools outside Detroit and was a free safety at NCAA Division II power Grand Valley State. In his 50s, he still enjoys playing basketball three times a week with students and staff at Seattle U, "even though I'm pretty bad now," he said.

Father Kelly has dedicated his career to exploring the connections between sports and Catholicism. The church, he said, has always understood that what we do with our bodies

necessarily affects our souls — thus the physicality of Catholic spirituality, with its sacraments and stained glass, processions and pilgrimages, religious dramas and rosary beads.

In addition to the obvious benefits of sports — physical health, a sense of community among teammates, learning to be a part of something larger than oneself — they can also foster cardinal virtues like fortitude and temperance, as young athletes learn to discipline their minds and bodies.

"The word *asceticism*, which we use in the Christian tradition for self-denial ... originally was used in Greek for athletic training," Father Kelly noted.

Another "fundamentally important" aspect of youth sports is that they should be occasions of joy, he said. "The word that describes doing the activity for its own sake, enjoyment, all of that — is *play*."

But he worries that the play is increasingly being sucked out of youth sports, as parents and coaches push kids to specialize in a single sport in pursuit of college scholarships and professional contracts. Treating athletics instrumentally, as a means to an economic end, guts the experience of its intrinsic value, he said (and often backfires, as kids succumb to burnout and overuse injuries).

As Father Kelly is fond of noting, the great 13th-century theologian St. Thomas Aquinas argued both that there can be "a virtue about games" and that it can actually be sinful to have too little play in one's life.

"I've never heard anyone come into the sacrament of reconciliation and say, 'Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned. I have not played in three months.' We don't tend to think of sin in these terms, but it is in the tradition that play is really basic to a fully human life."

Father Kelly said parents should check in with their kids occasionally to make sure they still enjoy the sports they're involved in.

One more thing to be careful about, "especially with youth, is the notion that somehow their value comes from winning," he said.

"That of course runs counter to the basic belief that we have that each of us is created in the image and likeness of God and is already of inestimable worth." ▀



## READ MORE

Jesuit Father Patrick Kelly is the author of *Catholic Perspectives on Sports: From Medieval to Modern Times* and the editor of *Youth Sport and Spirituality: Catholic Perspectives*.



Courtesy CYO Athletics

## 'SPORTS AS YOUTH MINISTRY'

That's the vision of CYO Athletics in the Archdiocese of Seattle, said director Tauno Latvala.

CYO is part of the archdiocesan Office for Youth and Young Adult Evangelization and oversees parish-based teams for boys and girls ages 5-18 in baseball, basketball, cross country, soccer, track and volleyball.

"CYO Athletics is sports done a different way," says the organization's mission statement. "[S]uccess is not measured solely by the scoreboard, but by the effort, team play, and fun of the experience."

"Athletics can be very competitive, and rightfully so," Latvala said. "Without competition, sports is not sports; but without the Gospel values being played out in our program, it's not an extension of the church's ministry to young people."

CYO takes a stand against the "win at all costs" mentality. Everyone gets equal playing time, regardless of talent; there are rules against running up the score.

"Through competition we're trying to bring out the best in each other," Latvala said. "I'm not trying to beat you down; I'm trying to be the best I can be."

Before each game, the kids pray to God "that we may participate to the best of our abilities and with a true spirit of thankfulness so that our efforts give greater glory to you."

It's the fans, Latvala said, who occasionally get a little too intense, especially during championship games. "I've had to get up on the microphone and say, 'Just a reminder: We cheer for kids, not against kids. We're one community.'"

## CYO ATHLETICS BY THE NUMBERS

51 participating Catholic parishes/schools

28 participating non-Catholic schools

1,194 teams (not including adult softball)

9,000+ participating athletes

Source: Tauno Latvala, director of CYO Athletics