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MISSION TO THE WORLD

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YOUR SPORT STORIES



CHRISTIANS IN SPORT

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CHRISTIANS IN SPORT IS A MOVEMENT OF COMPETITORS, COACHES AND OFFICIALS.

WE EXIST TO REACH THE WORLD OF SPORT FOR JESUS.

We're excited to bring you this winter edition of Back Pages. Looking back at 2023 we've got some brilliant stories of sportspeople living and speaking for Jesus, and how our digital resources are supporting such work. I hope these reflections will both excite and encourage you as you read them. But we're not just looking back at stories from the year gone by, looking ahead to 2024, there is plenty we're excited to share with you.

With the Olympic Games on the horizon, we'll give you the inside line on the work we're doing to prepare; both to support those competing at the pinnacle of their sport and to make the most of the opportunity to share the good news with an audience captivated by sporting stories this summer. In addition, you will read of a significant launch of resources that took place in November, and how these will be used to reach many new sportspeople around the world.

We remain thankful to God for your partnership as it sustains our mission to reach every sportsperson with the good news of Jesus.

BRIAN GLYNN

Back Pages Editor





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DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE

***REFLECTING AND
LOOKING AHEAD TO A
NEW YEAR***



Writing this message ahead of an Olympic year, it's quite something to reflect on the years passed since the Tokyo Olympics were postponed, and look ahead to in 2024.

A YEAR LIKE NO OTHER

Olympic years provide a brilliant chance for churches and Christian sportspeople to reach a wide audience with the good news of Jesus; resourcing this will be a key focus for us in 2024. As we get excited at the prospect of preaching the gospel to many sportspeople at guest events throughout the year, we're currently working on producing key resources to support this mission. These include a brand-new evangelistic film alongside physical and digital resources; all helping churches and individuals to share the good news of Jesus with local sportspeople as we prepare for the nation to be gripped by the Olympic spectacle.

A number of churches have already approached us to

work together, in the light of the centenary of the Chariots of Fire story, to bring the gospel to local sportspeople. The movie is a brilliant example of how the Olympic Games represent far more than just elite sport. Each Olympiad both reflects and influences the culture of its time as the world comes together to celebrate sport.

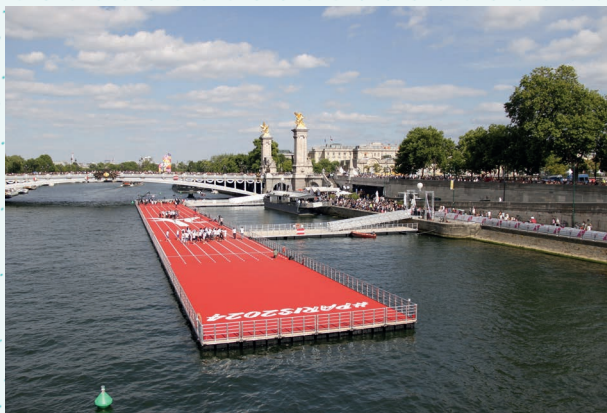
Looking forward, in May 2024 we have the privilege of being a key sponsor of 'Prom Praise' at the Albert Hall, giving a short talk during the event as it focuses on inspirational sporting music ahead of the Paris 2024 Olympic Games. The Games have galvanised a degree of excitement, not least because it's 100 years on from the last games in Paris made famous by 'Chariots of Fire' and the depiction of Christian athlete Eric Liddell in the film.

We're also encouraged by a number of opportunities to speak on the culture of elite and professional sport as an organisation recognised for our work within this space.

Much of this recognition is because of the privilege we have of being present in the public world of professional sport as a recognised organisation that understands the world of elite sport and cares for the well-being of those with it.

We've been pleased to be able to collaborate with the FA on their 'Faith in Football' project and to give the keynote speech at the event in December at Wembley stadium celebrating the connection between Christianity and football.





DAY TO DAY

With large-scale engagements and longer-term projects in the pipeline, it is critical to ensure that our focus does not shift off our day-to-day work of encouraging and equipping competitive and elite sportspeople to connect their sport and faith, and live and speak for Jesus in their sporting contexts.

The world of high-performance sport remains a challenging environment for Christians, training or competing away from home isolates people from their regular church families. High-profile individuals often face intense public scrutiny on their performance or even for their faith.

It's therefore encouraging to continue meeting privately with professional athletes, coaches, and young performance athletes and their families, supporting them through regular contact and supplemented by online Bible studies. This will continue to be a core part of our ministry to those at the top-level of sport, especially as a number of Christian athletes we support prepare for major world events in 2024.

Our investment into key digital projects is also vital for resourcing sportspeople. From the first time Game Day reader to the local network leader, our aim is to continue reaching a wider audience and supporting them to connect sport and faith.

This digital work is crucially important in a rapidly changing world, and we must continue to learn quickly and adapt to implement cutting-edge digital tools effectively.

The key challenge here is ensuring that digital projects lead to something physical so that the social media follower, the Game Day reader, the podcast listener, all have the opportunity to connect with other sportspeople and go together to reach the world of sport.

A DIFFICULT YEAR

Despite much to be encouraged by, we must not shy away from the reality that 2023 hasn't been without its difficulties. Psalm 90 is a crucial reminder of God's place as sovereign over us and our work, putting us in our place as those utterly dependent on Him.

Verse 12 says "Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom."

Throughout the year these words have pointed us to the purpose of our ministry as we've journeyed with sportspeople and faced some incredibly difficult times.

Our Managing Director Keith continued to receive intensive treatment for cancer having first been diagnosed in March 2022. Wonderfully in July he was given the news that he is in remission. Operating without such a key staff



member, whilst facing the emotional reality of a colleague and friend being very sick, was a real challenge for us as a team.

Furthermore, it is with great sadness that we remember the death of a young person who died in hospital after taking ill at Repton Sports Plus.

This sadness, whilst great, is not without hope. It was a privilege for a small number of Christians in Sport staff and volunteers to attend the thanksgiving service for the life of this young person, and to hear of the certainty of her personal faith in Jesus from family and friends.

The one thing, above all, that matters to Christians in Sport is that sportsmen and women have a personal

relationship with God through Jesus Christ, and a tragic event like this brings into sharp focus this reason for our mission. Looking ahead to an Olympic year and the opportunity that comes with it, may our work, under God's sovereignty and by His grace, be devoted to encouraging sportspeople to put their trust in Jesus, to run their race for Him for the rest of their days.

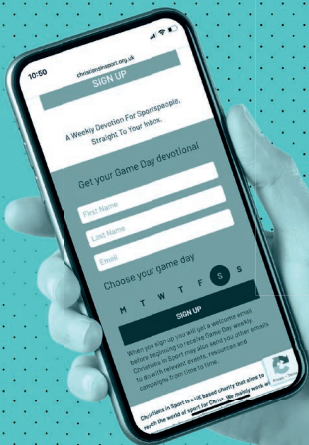
GRAHAM DANIELS

Graham is the General Director, he is also a director of Cambridge United FC and an associate staff member at St Andrew the Great church in Cambridge.



FROM PIXELS TO PEOPLE

HOW WE'RE USING THE DIGITAL WORLD TO
CONNECT SPORTSPEOPLE WITH JESUS





In all our digital work, we seek to help Christian sportspeople connect their sport and faith and cause sportspeople to think about Jesus. The stories of Diego, Jenny and George are snapshots of that.

Diego, an Italian basketballer, is one of the only evangelical Christians involved in sport that he knows of in Italy. He regularly reads articles on our website and gets the weekly devotion, Game Day, which he has begun to translate so that others in his country can think about sport and faith together.

Jenny used to play volleyball for Australia and regularly made use of Bible studies and articles we'd written online. She's begun adapting Game Day into Bible studies for athletes in Australia and is excited to think about establishing a work like Christians in Sport in her own country.

George (name changed) is in a football club with several Christians. Occasionally one of them would share an article or a devotion in their WhatsApp chat. This sparked conversations which led to George reading the Bible with a Christian, coming to church, and putting his trust in Jesus earlier this year.

When it comes to working in the digital world, we take the principle set out by John, that whilst technology is a great gift (in his case writing), it is not the ultimate heart of our work.

*I have much to write to you,
but I do not want to use paper
and ink. Instead, I hope to visit
you and talk with you face to
face, so that our joy may be complete.*

2 John 12



Jenny (pictured above) used to play volleyball for Australia and regularly made use of Bible studies and articles we'd written online.

We hope every blog, podcast, video, devotion and social media post leads people towards a physical interaction with someone – whether through one of our many different networks or through provoking someone to have a conversation about what they’ve seen online. Last year our content was seen nearly 300,000 times a month and over 1000 people took a significant next step of connecting with us or attending one of our networks. There are many more stories we do not know of how people have been impacted by our digital resources as posts are shared, podcasts are passed on and videos are scrolled through on the various platforms we post.

Game Day, our weekly devotion, is a good picture of what we’re trying to do in our digital work. It gets people into the Bible for a few minutes, helping them see how their sport and faith go together before encouraging people to pray about their sport coming up that day and the people they might have an opportunity to interact with.

With nearly 2,000 weekly subscribers, 85% of readers told us it had helped their understanding of how sport and faith worked together and 83% told us that it had helped motivate them to pray for their teammates. Elite athletes,

coaches, parents and young sportspeople have all been in touch to tell us stories of how they’ve found it helpful and of those they have passed it onto. As with Diego, we then hope to work with ministries and individuals in other countries to make it accessible in their own languages as we long to continue to help others consider the wonderful gift of sport and the opportunity it brings, in community, for speaking about Jesus.

Another thrust in the last 12 months has been writing more thought leadership pieces to help Christians think biblically about sport. Often, we’ve partnered with organisations like Premier Christianity and the Centre for Cultural Witness to publish on their platforms, reaching a wider audience than we would be able to, and helping the church consider the role sport plays in society. We’ve written pieces on transgender regulations in sport, how to think about winning and losing, racism in cricket, and the exciting growth of elite women’s football, to name a few. We believe that the Bible has much to say to the world of sport and are continuing to think through how we engage not only Christians but all of our country with the gospel as we reflect on sport through a Christian lens.





The tactics involved in digital communication are ever changing and we try and adapt our strategies accordingly. In this last year this has involved us beginning a TikTok channel with a specific aim of reaching more young people and engaging more on LinkedIn to try and find more people involved in professions around sport. In the next 12 months we want to think more specifically about digital evangelism and how we directly speak to sportspeople asking questions online about Christianity – recognising the recent Evangelical Alliance research which showed us that 36% of non-Christians would look at Google and YouTube as their first place to find out about Jesus.

There is much we would value prayer for as we wisely seek to communicate online. Whilst the world of digital communications is fast paced and evolving, it is a comfort to remember that God's word is unchanging and His love for sport and His desire to see people magnify Him in it is unrelenting. There's a great opportunity to supplement the physical work that we do with the right resources, and we're excited to see what God continues to do online.

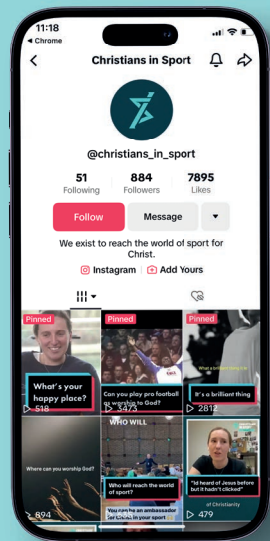
JONNY REID

Jonny is Christians in Sport's Head of Resources. He plays cricket for Cumnor CC and is one of the leaders of Town Church, Bicester.



SIGN UP FOR GAME DAY IN YOUR INBOX NOW:

christiansinsport.org.uk/gameday



Our TikTok account has shown steady growth since its launch. It can be found at @christians_in_sport.

36% OF NON-CHRISTIANS WOULD LOOK AT GOOGLE AND YOUTUBE AS THEIR FIRST PLACE TO FIND OUT ABOUT JESUS.

Talking Jesus Report 2022, Evangelical Alliance

TO ALL NATIONS



A NEW PATTERN OF PLAY FOR GLOBAL SPORTS MINISTRY



LEADERS COME TOGETHER WITH A MISSION TO THE WORLD

This November, Christians in Sport staff gathered together with over 100 leaders from 35 countries, in Malta, at the start of an exciting new launch of over 150 brand new resources, which have been years in the making, to support this global mission to sportspeople.

It was a privilege to hear interviews during the conference from those that have been leading sports ministry in a huge range of contexts. These included:

- A former president of the Solomon Islands football federation, who'd attended the International School of Sports Leadership (a sports ministry training initiative) in the early 2000s and is still working to share the gospel through football coaching and governance.
- Leaders in India running sports camps for young people to provide opportunity for those from a range of faith backgrounds to play high quality sports and hear the good news of Jesus.
- A former Romanian national team handball player who is now a key mentor working with elite sportswomen across Europe.
- A prosthetics expert making artificial limbs for Ukrainians injured in the current conflict, enabling them to play all-ability sports.



The purpose of the conference, however, was not just to look back on such wonderful stories of God's work across the world of sport.

A SUSTAINABLE STRATEGY FOR THE FUTURE

Sports ministry is demanding in every context, and is generally driven by key passionate leaders, but ministry that depends on individuals to keep going is unsustainable. This is why strategy that builds depth, connects leaders together and creates opportunity to train the next generation of leaders is so valuable.

Over the last three years, three cohorts of leaders, totalling 105 sportspeople from 45 countries, have been through the pilot Leadership Development Program. This year-long course launched with the aim of providing consistent training to sustain and grow the work of reaching sportspeople across the globe with the good news of Jesus.

During the pilot years, the course has been refined and will now launch in 2024 as the 'Mentor Development Programme' and will be available to use to train cohorts of mentors each year across the world. Many of the participants from the past three years were at the conference in Malta, and they'll be among the first to use the course to train new mentors within their regions, enabling sports ministry to grow.

Each year participants also undertook research projects, providing an opportunity to investigate questions arising from within their sports ministry contexts and to share knowledge gained with the wider community of leaders from across the world. Ten of these projects were presented at the conference, providing an exciting window into the landscape of global sports ministry.



An example of some of the research projects:

Challenges for female students transitioning into full time elite/ professional sport **(UK)**

Understanding LGBTQ+ Culture in Women's Professional Football **(Spain & Ukraine)**

Are MLB Youth Baseball Academies poverty factories? **(Dominican Republic)**

Is a deliberate personal foul in Basketball a sin? **(Brazil)**

To what extent can a coach fulfil the role of a father figure? **(USA)**



NEW RESOURCES TO REACH SPORTSPEOPLE

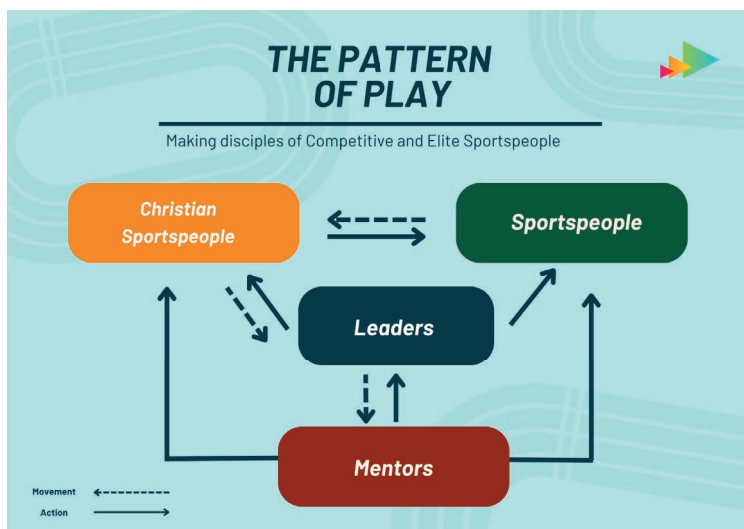
The Mentor Development Programme sits within a new pattern of play was launched at the conference, alongside specific resources, aiming to provide a framework that enables those on the ground to focus on the key task of making disciples in sport, whilst looking to train future leaders.

The pattern of play identifies four people groups in the context of sports ministry, from the sports person to the mentor, along with three core sports ministry strategies: sports camps, sports academies and sports mentoring. The goal for the pattern of play is to empower key leaders to continue growing sports ministries in their context, identifying and training the next generation, as well as effectively resourcing Christian sportspeople to share their faith.

Brand new digital and physical resources were launched to support this strategy. This includes a new set of Bible studies in Mark's gospel, produced in partnership with Biblica, to be used by Christian sportspeople to read with their teammates as well as a set of twelve studies for Christian sportspeople to use together to connect their sport and faith. These resources are all available online via a brand-new website, as well as over 50 new films and other digital resources.

WHAT'S NEXT

By October 2024 translations of resources will be available in eight of the most widely spoken languages in the world. The hope is that over the next five years, 50,000 leaders will be trained using these resources with the potential for approximately 1 million sportspeople to have the opportunity to read the Bible with a Christian friend.



The Pattern of Play taught at the conference

It's exciting for Christians in Sport to collaborate with people and organisations across the world on such a significant global project. Conferences such as this provide wonderful opportunities to reflect and learn as we share our experience and understanding, and learn from those around the world that share the same vision – to reach the whole world of sport with the good news of Jesus.

THE OPPORTUNITY OF AN OLYMPIC YEAR

FAITH AND THE OLYMPIC LEGACY

In the summer of 1924, Eric Liddell famously claimed victory in the 400m at the Paris Olympics. 100 years on, ahead of a third Olympic Games in Paris, Eric's name is still synonymous with Christian witness in sport, not least because of his depiction in the 1981 film 'Chariots of Fire.'

In previous Olympic years we've reached thousands of people with the good news as the spotlight shines on the greatest show on Earth. Olympic Games continue to be significant cultural reference points, transcending the world of sport, influencing and reflecting the culture of their time simultaneously. As the world's eyes turn to Paris in 2024, our aim is to make the most of this celebration of sport to share the good news of Jesus, and we'd love you to join us.

BEHIND THE SCENES


Whilst the world of elite sport looks completely different now to that of the Paris games 100 years ago, the identity struggle highlighted in Chariots of Fire is as relevant now as ever.

Harold Abrahams', moments before competing in the 100m final, describes the event as 'ten lonely seconds to



justify my existence." This is in contrast to Liddell's words, "I know God made me for a purpose, but he also made me fast and when I run, I feel his pleasure."

Every athlete preparing for Paris will be somewhere between the contrasting outlooks of Liddell and Abrahams. There will be many whose self-worth will be entirely placed on the outcome of a handful of seconds. For Christian



athletes, the pressure to be consumed by performance will be high. In the run up to the games we'll be opening the Bible regularly with athletes, as we do every season, to support them to fix their eyes on Jesus as they compete, and to know His love does not depend on their performance.

For athletes to know, as did Liddell, that sport is God's good gift to them, brings such freedom to compete at the highest level without fear, and that is a wonderful testimony to the transforming power of the gospel.

TELLING THE GREATEST STORY DURING THE GREATEST SHOW

In addition, we're working to make the most of this opportunity to reach a wide audience with the good news of Jesus. The contrast between Liddell and Abrahams' is a brilliant story to tell as we produce resources to highlight God's work in the lives of sportspeople ahead of the summer.

We're producing an evangelistic film, and in May Graham Daniels will be giving a talk focusing on Liddell and Abrahams at 'Prom Praise' at the Royal Albert Hall – an event which will be attended by thousands and watched by thousands more as it's broadcast online. In addition, evangelistic tracts and booklets will be produced to help sportspeople start conversations. The films and printed resources will be made available for individuals and churches to use, so keep your eyes peeled to make the most of them in your church and with your sports friends this coming spring and summer.

“FOR ATHLETES TO KNOW, AS DID LIDDELL, THAT SPORT IS GOD'S GOOD GIFT TO THEM, BRINGS SUCH FREEDOM TO COMPETE AT THE HIGHEST LEVEL WITHOUT FEAR, AND THAT IS A WONDERFUL TESTIMONY TO THE TRANSFORMING POWER OF THE GOSPEL.”

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YOUR SPORT STORIES

Reaching the world of sport for Christ is a huge task, and in the UK it's an incredible privilege to be able to walk alongside many different people looking to live and speak for Jesus within their sporting context.

Here's three stories from people we've caught up with this autumn. We hope these encourage you as you support this work of reaching the sportspeople that exist on our doorstep with the good news of Jesus.

GISELA OTTEN

Gisela Otten is from the Netherlands and works and lives in Cambridge. She plays football for Cambridge United and is one of the Cambridge local network leaders.

You stopped playing football when you came to the UK from the Netherlands initially but now play for Cambridge United, how did that come about?

I grew up in a Christian family, going to church and playing football, I played at the highest level until I was 21. In the Netherlands football was mostly on a Saturday for me, so there wasn't a clash. When I moved to the UK I stopped playing club football because I wasn't used to that clash on a Sunday, in the Netherlands Sunday is more of a day of rest culturally, shops are closed and so it was quite a shift.

I'm a scientist and moved to Cambridge after I'd been in the UK for a few years to take up a postdoctoral research position and now I work for a drug discovery company developing new cancer drugs.

It was in Cambridge, during a soft patch in my faith, that I ended up back playing football. I was in church every week, but I was the person who turned up late and left early, but one Sunday I sat next to Graham and Michelle Daniels. Graham encouraged



me to come and train at Cambridge United, where there were a few other Christian girls who were brilliant.

"SO OFTEN I CAN SEE GOD AT WORK IN MY CLUB IN INCREDIBLE WAYS, AND IT HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH WHAT I DO. IF ANYTHING, IT IS WHEN I FELT WEAK THAT GOD PROVIDED ME OPPORTUNITIES TO SHARE THE GOSPEL."

What was it like to start playing again?

It was particularly good because it was normal to be a Christian in the team straight away, but there were still challenges! I wrestled with how I should behave on the pitch, being competitive in a way that was consistent with my faith was tough. I actually asked one of the other Christian players to tell me off if I slipped up – to keep me in line almost.

I often wrestle with pride, which is still a battle now as captain of the team. But it's not about me or my performance, whether I'm on the pitch or the bench, it's all about serving my teammates as I lead them. My faith gives me peace in this though, knowing Jesus is a real place of safety, I know He made me to play and to love it, but when it goes wrong His love doesn't change.

Do you think that safety is distinctive? Do other players recognise that it's a difference in you?

I think so, girls do come to me with difficult things they're facing, I think they recognise that it's not my intention to judge, but to love them in those moments. I think when others see the hope we have as Christians, especially in the tough times in their lives, they realise they're missing out on something amazing. We've seen some of the girls in the team become Christians over the years through the witness of other players and that is wonderful.

You've been coaching at Sports Plus for a while now. When did you first hear of Christians in Sport? What's it been like to be involved in things like Sports Plus from your perspective?

I wish I'd been at Sports Plus as a child, it's like the best thing ever! When I came to serve at Sports Plus, I began to learn a lot more about the connection between sport and faith, coaching boys and girls there and sharing a bit about my own life and faith, it pushed me to dig deeper into the connection between the two.

At Sports Plus you see so clearly through the week that the gift to play is from God, and it's so encouraging to be communicating that with young people, especially that sport can be worship.

How does that understanding play out for you now?

I didn't see as clearly that sport can be worship before serving at Sports Plus, that helped me with Sundays too; I saw sport much more as a good gift from God, and that I didn't need to worry as much about the clash with church.

I still make church the priority, but in season I'll be there at 10am with my kit on ready to go in the afternoon. I see football

much more as a mission field now alongside worship, and our church family is really supportive of that; they see that I come on Sundays and serve in other ways and bring my teammates along sometimes. In turn they often turn up to games in the afternoon to support us which is brilliant!

We now have a group of four Christian players at the club, and we try to pray together before games, and that has really encouraged me. It helps me to focus on God on and off the pitch and with His spirit do my best to glorify Him. It helps me to put everything in a bigger perspective and not lose sight of the race we're running together and to keep going.

You lead the Cambridge network, what's that like?

The prayer gatherings are brilliant just to spend time with other Christians who love sport, and to share similar challenges no matter what the sport, we have people in the group doing everything from frisbee, to running, to CrossFit.

We've run quizzes over the last year, which are such an easy invite and many of my teammates have come along. This winter we're doing carols in the Abbey stadium where we play, we're hoping to get a great turnout.

My personal highlight is seeing how often God works in response to prayer at our local network meetings as we journey together. So often I can see God at work in my club in incredible ways, and it has nothing to do with what I do. If anything, it is when I felt weak that God provided me opportunities to share the gospel.



RICHARD MCBRIDE

Richard played a variety of sports throughout his 20s and 30s, from golf to mountaineering and trail running. He's the sports ministry group leader at Glenabbey church in Northern Ireland supported by Christians in Sport.

How did your church become involved in sports mission?

Back in around 2017 Phil Small and Dave McCluggage from Christians in Sport ran a Pray, Play, Say series at our church, helping sportspeople in the church to connect sport and faith. Off the back of that we decided that there was a real opportunity for us to reach people through sport, so we set up a sports ministry group in 2018. The group meets once a month and consists of about eight people from across the church, and we organise midweek training evenings for sportspeople and look to run evangelistic events every few months.

You've been using the Rugby World Cup to get people into church recently. How has that been?

We've run a few big screen events where we've shown the Ireland games at church alongside an interview or a talk on the Christian faith. It helps to pick a good game, over 100 people came to the Ireland vs South Africa match where Phil Small and Peter Browne did a pre-match interview around Peter's career as a player and his faith, then Phil did a short talk at half time. The atmosphere was brilliant, and massively aided by the quality of the game, and Ireland winning! We did screen the New Zealand quarter final, but needless to say it was a bit flatter after the game, it shows how shallow we can be as sportspeople at times!





But both events were great in terms of getting people into church, it's a relaxed atmosphere and guests hear the good news of Jesus. If the message shared has put a stone in a guest's shoe, so to speak, the follow up is really simple, just turn up to the same venue the following day for church.

What are the specific challenges you find when trying to reach sportspeople and trying to encourage sportspeople in the church to get involved in mission?

The danger is that our ministry group becomes an events organising team, but events are just one part of the picture. We aim to support and equip sportspeople to connect sport and faith and share Jesus in their teams alongside running those bigger evangelistic events. It can be a struggle to get people along to evenings where we pray and learn together, and sometimes that's disheartening. But when you come to run sports tournaments, or quizzes or big screenings of matches, those evenings of equipping are so vital for sportspeople to be able to invite friends and follow up afterwards.

And follow up is the other challenge, the next step after an event is so important to make the most of the opportunity that comes after the gospel is proclaimed. It's important to continue to share the gospel with sportspeople and enable them to go into more depth but it's hard to do that well.

A real challenge has also been reaching out to those in need using sport. There's a hotel close by housing asylum seekers and as a group we really want to show the kindness and love of Christ to them. I've run a fortnightly running group over the last year, but I must admit it has been more of a walking group

so far. One of the guys did come along to Parkrun though, finishing 4th at his first event, then 2nd the following week! He's now obtained asylum and moved to Belfast, but my hope is that he'll have had a really good impression of church through us reaching out. Who knows what God will do with that.

What are the highlights?

What's exciting about sport is that it's a ready-made interface between Christians and those that don't believe. From pools to pitches, sidelines to fairways, sport is a place of connection, where you can build deep and real friendships.

Sport also encompasses a huge range of people, we can use it to meet those on the fringes of society, to those who are thriving. If we run an event it appeals to everyone from youth to those in adult sport and even to older folk who are now passionate armchair fans!

It's exciting to see the diversity sports events can attract. Partnering with Christians in Sport also helps us focus on the important task of inviting people in and following up. For example, we know we can rely on the Sports Quiz being high quality. Our confidence in the quality of the events means we can get on and do our bit without having to worry about how the night is going to go.



JOSH BAILEY

Josh played academy football at Bristol Rovers and gained a professional contract at 18, but a severe knee injury ended his professional career. He's now a student studying mental health nursing at the University of Exeter and led the Christians in Sport student group at Exeter last year.

What was it like as a young academy player and a Christian?

It's a macho environment, there's pressure to conform to the culture straight away, especially as I went out on loan as a youngster to get game time. In one of those dressing room environments – the captain, who I didn't get on well with, confronted me at lunch after training one day, "Josh what is that you do before a game, is that praying? What do you pray for?" I replied: "I pray for you." He was taken aback, saying "What do you mean?" I told him I prayed that we'd all enjoy ourselves, the opportunity to play, that no one would be injured. It was such a simple answer, but he never questioned my faith again. It was a moment of realising how important it was to nail my colours to the mast as a young Christian.

As I progressed, I got more opportunities to play at first team level at a few semi-pro clubs which I really enjoyed.

I was always the youngest person in each environment, but I think other coaches and players noticed something different in me because of my faith. And then, playing for Dorchester Town, I got a horrible injury in a game. I ruptured my ACL, tore my meniscus, and sustained an osteochondral defect and had to have surgery to repair the damage.

How did you cope with such a devastating setback?

It was such a difficult time, the only thing getting me through this was my relationship with God. I think I would have been completely defeated without it.

About 6 months into the recovery, I had a scan because my knee was still not right, days later my then long-term girlfriend broke up with me, and an hour later I got a call saying I needed further surgery that Friday. Throughout my time as a player, I met regularly with Mike Harris from Christians in Sport to read the Bible, and it just so happened that we'd scheduled in a meeting that week. I was panicking but he was able to really point me to God, to help me see that God was with me and He was in control, having a Christian

"IT WAS SUCH A DIFFICULT TIME, THE ONLY THING GETTING ME THROUGH THIS WAS MY RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD. I THINK I WOULD HAVE BEEN COMPLETELY DEFEATED WITHOUT IT."



mentor with that outlook was really amazing.

I was fortunate to be offered a pro contract despite my injury, and my recovery was going well. But 11 months after surgery, just weeks away from playing, the pain in my knee returned and it just wouldn't go away. I was told I had to wait it out, it could be months or years and it was then that I thought about stepping away from football.

What was it like transitioning from professional sport to university?

Initially it was difficult. I was 20 when most around me were 18, and I'd worked in a professional environment for nearly 4 years when others hadn't even been through 6th form because of Covid. But I managed to settle in an amazing church and got involved in youth work there.

I actually didn't play any sport in first year. I still had chronic knee pain and I spent so much time on my feet as a nursing student, there were days when I couldn't even run for a bus! It was especially weird because I'd always been known as a footballer, and now

hardly anyone around me even knew I'd played football!

Towards the end of first year, I started running, and that helped me to gain the confidence, to get back in to football at the start of second year. I trialled at the university club, got into a team and then found myself in the first team after a few weeks.

It was brilliant to be back in that competitive environment, and the atmosphere in the group was completely different to what I had been used to. I was able to speak about my faith early on and my teammates would me questions because they were genuinely curious. I remember being asked yet again, as I was praying before a match, "Josh, what are you doing?" But this time it wasn't confrontational; it was out of genuine interest.

There were some great leaders that year at the Christians in Sport group, I learnt so much from those in other sports facing similar challenges, and it was exciting to share that love of sport with other Christians who were like me.

I was asked to lead the group in my third year which I ended up doing alongside captaining the university



BLACKNOL
LIMITED

first team. It was a big workload! But I realised that I suddenly had a real opportunity to be a role model within the football club.

In my career I'd always been the youngest in the team, but now I had all this experience behind me as an elite athlete and I was in this respected university environment, talking to all these players about faith! And I had real experience to back up what I was saying. I was amazed to look back and see how much God had worked already in my life enabling me to help set the tone in that team, to show the love of Jesus to other players there.

I put on a dinner last year for the team where I shared my testimony, and Duncan from the CIS student team came down to support. About 20 people came, and it led to so many conversations on the night and training or car journeys to away games since.

As a former group leader and now a regular member, what are the challenges and encouragements of being part of the group?

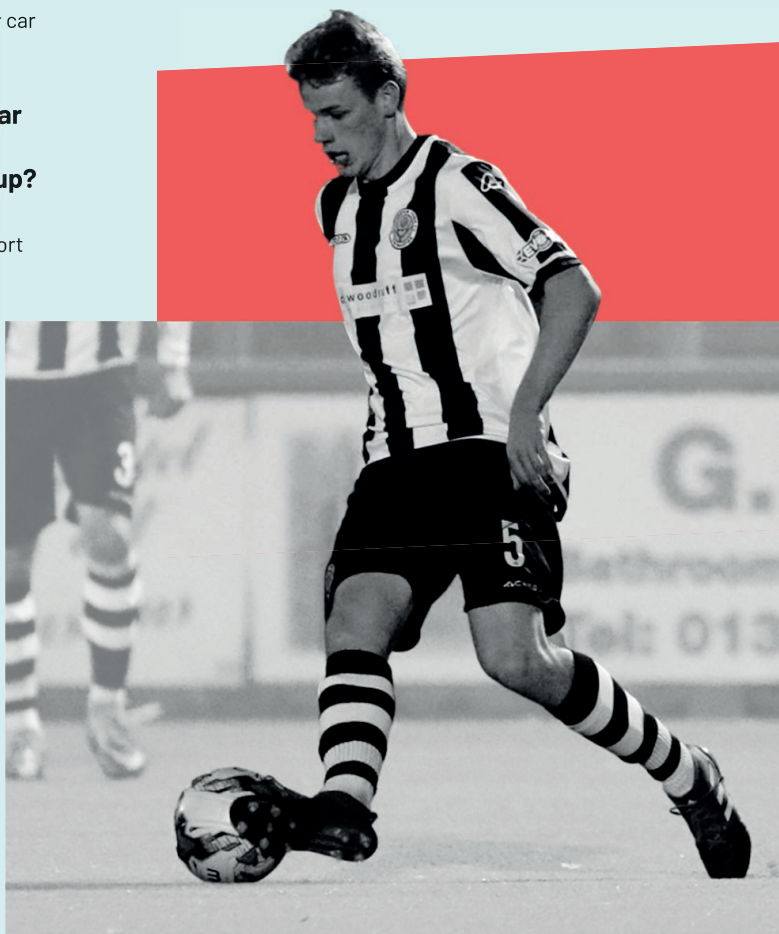
The brilliant thing about being in a Christians in Sport group is when you're opening the Bible and praying on a Wednesday morning, you know what you discuss will be useful later that same day. Whether it's facing a night out after the game or getting to grips with what it looks like to be competitive in a godly way on the pitch, it's all real stuff we're discussing and applying.

Church is brilliant and so important, but the teaching and application can never be quite so direct or specific as it's for the whole body of the church together – that's why the Christians in Sport group in the week is such a valuable addition.

You're graduating this summer, what's next for you?

I had a plan for my life, but I don't like to make concrete plans anymore and you probably can understand why! I'm currently the Club Welfare Secretary and building an inclusive club culture is important, so I'm focussed on that while continuing to share my faith with the guys.

I hope to stay in Exeter but working as a nurse means I won't have a great deal of free time, and I know playing football still isn't great for my knee, especially as I'm not one to play half-heartedly! But I want to remain in sport to have friends I can share my faith with, whether that's football or a running club or something else we'll see!



SPORTS PLUS 2024



DATES

PERTH: Sunday 7th to Friday 12th July

BELFAST 1: Sunday 28th July to Friday 2nd August

BRECON: Sunday 28th July to Friday 2nd August

MONKTON 1: Sunday 28th July to Friday 2nd August

MONKTON 2: Sunday 4th to Friday 9th August

BELFAST 2: Sunday 4th to Friday 9th August

REPTON: Sunday 11th to Friday 16th August

GIGGLESWICK: Sunday 18th to Friday 23rd August

FIND OUT MORE AT:

christiansinsport.org.uk/sportsplus



THE SUNDAY SPORT QUESTION

SHOULD MY CHILD PLAY SPORT ON A SUNDAY?



Sunday sport is a difficult and sensitive topic for parents or guardians of sporty children, with no easy answers. But it's essential to address if we want to encourage sporty children in their faith and commitment to the local church, whilst making the most of their talents to glorify the God who gives them.

As you work out an approach to Sunday sport, you may face difficult questions from within the church. So how can you respond to someone who says your child should not compete on a Sunday?

DECISIONS NEED TO BE MADE

When sport and church clash, tough calls need to be made. Will missing training or matches lead to your child getting

dropped, or losing friendships with teammates? Will the coach think they aren't committed? Will they resent church because it's causing them to miss sport?

If your child misses church, will they drift from a relationship with Jesus? Will they view church as a rule rather than an opportunity to grow as part of a wider church family?

When deciding, it's worth saying that the sabbath or holy festivals are an example of a 'disputable matter' which Paul mentions in Romans 14 – issues that cause Christians to take different views and have the potential to cause division.

The Bible does not give a specific answer on Sunday sport, but here are some helpful principles to help you navigate a conversation in church on such a disputable matter.

BE FULLY CONVINCED

In Romans 14, Paul urges his readers to be "fully convinced in your own mind." What do you have in place to think this issue through as a family, in order to become convinced?

It is important to know why you have made a decision, as well



as being willing to listen, and open to changing your decision if you are convinced of a different view.

This question may come from a genuine concern and care from someone in your church, so remember the words of Hebrews 10:24-25:

“Consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”

Can you help them understand that sport is a wonderful gift from God and a brilliant context for worship and witness to His Glory? Yet you are aware that sport, and progressing in sport, requires time, commitment and sacrifice.

Can you creatively help your child regularly spend time with other Christians their own age, as well as from the wider diverse church family? How will they be taught from God’s word? What can you do to disciple your child and spur and encourage them on in their faith?

Remember this isn’t to justify your decision to someone else – but to become fully convinced in your own mind as you pray, think and talk this through.

BE OPEN IN YOUR APPROACH

To become clear, it is essential to have ongoing conversations with:

Your church – your pastor and/or youth worker. Share your concerns and decisions you need to make, help them understand why you might not be there on a Sunday. If they can’t practically help, at least they can pray and journey with you.

The coach – do they know your dilemma? Do they know church is a necessity for your family? This is also a brilliant opportunity to witness!

Your child – help them understand why you want church to be a priority whilst acknowledging sport as a wonderful, God-given context to worship and share faith. They will notice the effort you are making see how much you value their spiritual growth.

As you respond to others in church:

Listen to their story – If it’s another parent, they may be in the same boat. You might both agree that church and youth group are essential, but it looks different for each family.

Learn – have they done something you haven’t thought about? Share ideas, remember you’re not trying to justify yourself or win an argument.

Love one another – the person asking might have a genuine care and concern for your spiritual growth, and that is wonderful! Keep that motivation at the centre of your conversations so that the body of Christ might be built up.



Check out The Academy for more articles, podcasts and videos exploring the issue of Sunday sport, you can find all of these at

christiansinsport.org.uk/sunday

4 WAYS TO PRAY FOR... **PARENTS OF SPORTSPEOPLE**

Being a Young Performance Athlete (YPA) on an elite pathway is a really exciting time!

Time to train consistently in the sport you love, time to travel to new places for competitions, time to test whether you can make it to the next level. Exciting times and yet very challenging too. YPA parents journey with their children in the highs and the lows. The lows of disappointment, de-selection, injury, being released from contracts or pathways.

Over the past few years, a key support network of YPA parents has grown with the purpose of sharing experiences, connecting with other parents and praying for each other and their children.

Here's four ways you can pray for Christian parents and guardians supporting young performance athletes:

1 PRAY FOR JOY

Pray that YPA parents would be able to be thankful for the good gift of sport and experience joy as they support their children to make the most of their God-given talents, and relationships within pathway sport. Pray that YPA parents would point their children to the one who brings ultimate joy amidst the rollercoaster ride of emotions and challenges that they face in this pressurised environment.

2 PRAY FOR WISDOM

Pray for YPA parents working through tough decisions as they seek to bring their children up to love Jesus and enjoy making the most of their sporting gift. Whether it's Sunday sport or working out how to respond in a godly way to success or failure, pray for wisdom in decision making for parents.

3 PRAY FOR CONNECTION

It can feel isolating as a YPA parent if you don't know of other Christian parents on the same journey. Pray that YPA families would have opportunity to connect with other families in similar situations, to find mutual support and encouragement.

4 PRAY FOR CHURCHES

Pray for YPA families to be imbedded in their local church. Pray for YPA families where this is a challenge due to increased commitments. Pray for good communication between YPA families and their church leaders, and for wisdom for churches on how to support them.

THE ACADEMY



The Academy is our new digital platform dedicated to equipping you to live and speak for Jesus in the world of sport. With Videos, blogs, podcasts and more, there's something for you wherever you are in your sporting life.

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