



VIEW IN THE PEW

A SERVICE OF THE CATHOLIC COMMUNICATION CAMPAIGN

What Does Sports Have to Do with Spirituality?

By Dr. Ed Hastings

Speak to them where they are!

At my local parish I have noticed there is one group of parishioners who have been conspicuously absent recently: the young people. Where have all the young people gone? I don't know the answer to that question, but I do know what they come out for—they come to play sports. Certainly not all of them, but many participate in sports on the parish level. What if it was possible to use sports as a vehicle connecting the young people with God? What if sports could provide opportunities for catechizing or evangelization? Impossible? I think not.

One of the great spiritual writers in the Catholic tradition, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin said, "by virtue of Creation and still more of the Incarnation, nothing here below is profane for those who know how to see." Chardin is

pointing out that if we only know how to see we can locate God anywhere—even in sports.

So the problem is teaching people how to see, helping them to adjust their lenses. How can we do that? Our notion of spirituality like our understanding of God is far too limited. We tend to think that the only time that we can really communicate with God is in church, or prayer is only for the priests, brothers and sisters and not the ordinary person in the pew. St. Ignatius taught that it is possible for all people to connect with God, to see God in all things.

Two specific ways to help people with their "sight" or to help them connect sports and spirituality would be self-forgetfulness and self-knowledge. Self-forgetfulness is letting go or surrendering; it is what Jesus meant when he said in order to find yourself lose yourself. Illustrated most poignantly by Jesus on the cross, self-forgetfulness creates the possibility for teamwork.

There is no "I" in team and the more we understand this the better the team will be. Self-knowledge is about self-discovery. This entails learning about our strengths and our weaknesses, our gifts and limitations.

The more we come to know ourselves; the more we come to know God. Sports offer the possibility for players to recognize what they are good at and what they are not so good at. Wise coaches can help players handle this awareness with ease.

Wouldn't it be great if our coaches could also be known as ministers? Trained properly these coach-ministers could help the young people see God even on the sports field. Perhaps this is what St. Paul meant when he called us to "pray always."

Dr. Ed Hastings played basketball at Villanova University, has a doctorate in Spirituality from Duquesne University and is the Director of the Center for Sport, Spirituality and Character Development, Neumann College, Aston, Pa.

