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Christian Youth Ministries and Youth Sports: A View from the Trenches

MARK GRANQUIST

When church professionals who work with middle school and high school youth gather, their conversations often turn quickly to the challenges to their ministries and programing from youth sports, both organized club sports and interscholastic sports offered through the local schools. To be sure, there are these days a plethora of other things that draw youth away from church activities—music and drama, volunteer activities, and of course part-time employment—so it is not fair to place the full focus on youth sports. But on balance, the American mania for sports at all levels has a heavy pull on teenage and preteen youth (and of course their families), and youth sports often seem to be a veritable “black hole” for the time and commitment of all involved. The trouble is not only that American youth are training and competing more intensely and at earlier ages, but that these activities seemingly take more of their time and commitment, drawing in the focus and energies of their entire families. Although youth sports have long been a challenge to Christian youth ministries, these activities are now consuming more and more time of the youth involved, often drawing them away from activities and ministries

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This article will explore these and other questions through the experiences and observations of those who are actually doing Christian ministry with youth and their parents. This will be accomplished through interviews with six different Christian youth ministers, from a variety of Lutheran congregations in the greater Twin Cities (Minnesota) metropolitan area. The article will not provide an identification of the specific Christian youth professionals, but will instead represent an amalgamation of their views and insights.

VALUES AND CONCERNS

To begin with, all six of the Christian youth professionals interviewed thought that youth sports could be of great value to their youth. Many of these youth directors had themselves participated in sports in their youth, from Little League through high school, college, and beyond. A number of them had done some coaching of youth sports in the past, and one of them was still involved in coaching both interscholastic and club youth sports. They generally spoke of the importance of youth sports in their own lives, and in the lives of the youth with whom they worked. Mostly they supported the involvement of their congregation's youth in youth sports (to a degree), and wanted to do what they could to make it possible for them to participate. The positives they saw in youth sports (and sports in general) included specifically the ideas of practice and personal discipline, the cultivation of teamwork and cooperation, and the ability to exercise not only their muscles, but also leadership and interpersonal relationships (both with other youth as well as adults). Sports can teach youth to deal with both winning and losing, to learn how to deal with disappointment, and how to work towards an important goal. One youth director spoke of the importance that sports had in her teenage life, saying that sports were "one of the most formative activities of my life, and I'd want those advantages for my youth." On a more practical level, another youth director observed that one of the advantages of youth sports was that they were "one of the few times that they have to put down their electronic devices."

However, they were also unanimous about their serious concerns regarding the current culture and practice of youth sports in the United States. It is important to divide youth sports into its twin components, the interscholastic sports sponsored by schools and the independent club or "traveling" sports sponsored by local and regional associations. Interscholastic sports have been a feature of American culture for at least a century, and of the two (in the opinion of those interviewed) is rather the lesser problem. Yes, interscholastic sports are often akin to a religion in some schools and some communities, but they at least are regulated by state associations and are publically accountable; it is possible to bring concerns about their activities to school boards and administrators. As well, interscholastic

sports are generally limited both in the numbers of games allowed to each team and the length of their seasons. All of the youth directors mentioned that they had had contact with school officials about school sports, and many of them suggested that they could still maintain the practice of shielding Wednesday evenings and Sundays from school sports (something traditional in the Upper Midwest and some other areas). One youth director suggested that he had found school coaches and administrators were generally sympathetic to his concerns, but another found that local officials were not very supportive of dedicated times for church activities.

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The challenges of interscholastic sports are of long standing, and have remained fairly constant over the years. The real, growing concern now is rather directed at the independent “club” sports, or those sponsored by local youth sports associations. The activities of these associations range from local leagues and activities for younger children to club and “traveling” teams for older youth. These youth sports activities have expanded dramatically in the last twenty to twenty-five years, and because they are largely unregulated (outside of their own associations), have expanded both in scope and time. As these youth directors see this sector of youth sports, they had quite a few concerns. They felt that these club sports were taking ever increasing amounts of youths’ time and energy—too much time devoted to practices, too many games, and far too many weekend tournament activities that meant that some youth could not attend Sunday worship for large sections of the year. Since these clubs are not supported financially by public entities (schools, etc.), they also put a great deal of financial pressure on youth and their families and also take a great deal of family time for traveling, tournaments, and fundraising. This is not even to mention the sports camps and other outside training activities that seemingly become obligatory if a youth wants to “move up” the ladder of club sports. As one youth director observed, “It is almost a relief when a youth makes the high school varsity team, because they are then limited in the number of practices and games, and they don’t have the constant weekend tournaments.” Another found the amount of money that these clubs charged their participants to be “offensive,” and suggested that these groups were a “big business.”

EFFECTS ON THE YOUNG PEOPLE

In focusing on the youth athletes themselves and the effects of youth sports on them, these youth directors had a number of concerns. They saw that their

young athletes were, at ever-younger ages, being forced to specialize in one sport and to devote ever-increasing time to that one sport. As one youth director observed, “I was a three-sport athlete in school, but increasingly that kind of activity is not possible.” To “make the team” and to succeed in high school sports, many youth feel that they have to work on a single sport almost year-round. This also means increasingly that it becomes less possible for these youth athletes to participate in other non-sports activities, such as church activities. As one youth director suggested, these youth do not get the benefits of cross-training, and at having “downtime” where they can relax. And such specialization and intensity is happening at an increasingly young age. It used to be more common in high school, but now these things are reaching down into the middle school, where promising youth athletes aged eleven to fourteen are culled out for intensive training.

This intensity and specialization at a younger age was of great concern to these youth directors, especially concerning the personal development of the youth themselves. Of course, there are the physical challenges of such intense specialization. But even further, they worried about the social and psychological toll that this trend is having on their youth, especially on the sixth- through eighth-graders. Students at this age are less personally mature, and they might not have the internal resources to “stand up” for themselves against the pressures put on them by some coaches and parents. As one youth director observed, “There is a lot of fear in some of these kids—fear that they won’t be able to compete, to make the next team, and so on.” Another worried about the sports “rejects,” those who in ninth and tenth grade are pushed out of the sports to which they have devoted so much time: What happens to their personal development and self-esteem when they fail to make the team? Still another wondered whether there was still any “fun” left in these sports activities, or whether it was all about the striving and winning. “Do kids have a chance anymore to play a pickup game just for the fun of it?” he wondered.

THE ROLE OF PARENTS

Many of these Christian youth professionals wondered aloud about the role of parents and coaches in such activities, especially the tendency of some of them to achieve vicariously their own dreams of athletic glory through their children. Others saw a serious financial interest pushing this athletic striving, suggesting that many were chasing the dream of a college scholarship (or even professional career) for their youth; one youth director saw some parents as being “completely unrealistic” about these prospects. On an even larger level, the whole issue of sports in American society was of great concern—how the world is now divided into winners and losers, and how sports figures are given almost mythic proportions. As one youth director suggested, “We have created a cult of the body itself, but what about developing the soul?” There is a definite focus on youth and strength and good physical attributes, as if these things themselves can stave off aging and

death—and if you want to see why this is strong in our youth, just look at the increasingly desperate attempts of their parents.

EFFECTS ON YOUTH MINISTRIES

These six Christian youth professionals all talked about the pressures and the complications that youth sports have increasingly put on their ministries and their youth programming. All of them suggested that they have had to rearrange activities and programming because of the increasingly difficult schedules of their students. All of them had stories of youth who had committed to participation in youth trips or camps who had to pull out later on—often because “our team made it to the state tournament” or something similar. Often activities had to be curtailed or were revised to work around the sports schedules—especially confirmation ministries, which in several cases were moved later on Wednesday evening to make it possible for students to attend. One youth director talked about shifting confirmation to a modular schedule, allowing students the flexibility to pick periods of time when they would or would not attend confirmation, as their seasons allowed. One youth director suggested that the “battle” with youth sports was a “losing battle, and we’ve lost,” while others remained optimistic that youth ministry and youth sports could coexist, given some creative work and some “give and take.” All the youth directors thought that working with the schools was generally a reasonable way to go, but most were rather pessimistic about the possibilities of significant negotiations with the club sports coaches and associations. “They are a league unto themselves,” observed one, “and we have very little leverage with them.” Yet another suggested that since these organizations are generally volunteer-led, the youth’s parents should become more involved in these groups in order to provide an entry into their decision making.

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Some of these youth directors suggested a strategy akin to “if you can’t beat ’em, join ’em,” where they saw very good possibilities in using the sports world to enhance their own ministries. Several saw good results from attending games and rooting for their youth, suggesting that this was a very good way to have an entry into their lives. One observed that “attending games or events could be a great way to connect with youth,” although she also observed that as she got older and had more family responsibilities, the opportunities to do so were diminishing. Several of these youth directors had been or currently were active in coaching either interscholastic or club sports, which they felt gave them increased visibility in the local youth culture, especially with families who were tangential to organized religion or completely removed from it. One suggested that the focus of his youth

ministry had shifted over the years, and that he found himself doing a lot more leadership development with youth, stressing skills that would be equally valid now on sports teams as well as later in the students' lives. Another suggested that sports can be very foundational for youth and that it was important not to take an antagonistic attitude toward them; rather, they should "run in the same direction." Most of them saw little use in a directly confrontational approach or a form of "culture war."

This is not to say that they were advocating throwing in the towel or giving over control to the youth sports organizations. Rather, they seemed to be suggesting that youth sports would continue to be a formative force in students' lives, and that youth ministry programs needed to recognize their role in helping youth work through the positives and negatives of these experiences. "Sports helps students discipline and develop their muscles," said one youth director, "but we help discipline the whole person, and in the long run, that's far more important." They also suggest that youth ministry work on skills that these student-athletes need to learn, such as finding balance in one's life, the art of dealing with disappointment and rejection, and the need to "exercise one's faith." As one youth director suggested, "The church cares about the whole person," and helping students find their way in life with relationships and peers is in the long run a more important skill than athletics. Some of the youth directors suggested that it is important for the church to help youth learn to deal with adults, both parents and coaches, to be able to stand on their own two feet, and to learn to say no when adults pressure them. Given that these issues are hitting youth at a younger age (when they are less able to do this), these skills become all the more valuable.

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WORKING WITH THE PARENTS

Most of these youth directors also strongly suggested that the chief focus of their interaction needs to be with the parents rather than with the students, for it is the job of parents and other adults to help balance and focus the lives of these students. Many of them suggested that some parents have a completely unrealistic picture of the benefits for their children of sports, focusing on college scholarships and professional opportunities that will be available to only a tiny fraction of students who participate in youth sports. One youth director asked, rhetorically, "Are we chasing our dreams through our children?" Some parents are living their own faded dreams of athletic prowess through their children—behavior that must be called out for what it is. But most parents seem to get caught up in youth sports, wanting to be excited about their children's activities, but unfortunately some-

times taking things too far. It is often a question of setting priorities, said one youth director. “I say to them, if it is all right for their youth to miss church activities for sports, is it also OK to miss sports for church? Some of them look at me like I was crazy—it seems to be the first time that anyone had ever suggested such a thing to them.”

Other youth directors suggested that it was important for the parents and adults of the congregation to get involved with their local youth sports organizations as coaches, managers, and board members, as a way to have some influence and control over the activities of these groups. Church people ought to be involved, said one, because “somebody has to be the voice of reason in the room.” Another said, “You can’t have an influence or change things from outside,” and these organizations can be responsive to parents if they get involved and speak their concerns. One youth director put it this way, “I think there is a lot of fear involved, both with youth and their parents—fear that if they say something or miss a practice or a tournament, that they will be ostracized or shut out. It’s the fear that we need to address in a positive way.” Another suggested, “If you don’t like what is going on, get involved.” Simply put, our youth may be athletes, true, but they are much more than that, and those responsible for youth must always be aware of this. The church needs to be involved with the stewardship of the youth’s time and energy, so that they can mature into happy, healthy, and balanced Christian adults. “When parents always prioritize youth sports over church activities,” said one youth director, “this is sending a powerful message to their children about what is important.” Parents need to realize this.

MAKING ADJUSTMENTS

All of the youth directors interviewed stated that they had had to make structural changes to their religious programming for youth in order to deal with youth sports. Besides adjusting the timing of youth education and religious activities (usually later in the evenings or weekends to work around practices and games), they also developed different strategies for other activities, especially retreats, camps, and mission trips. One of them explained, “I hate to be hard-nosed about it, but I’ve started requiring more commitments up front (monetary and otherwise), and am less inclined to allow youth out of their commitments for most reasons. We make too many apologies, and allow ourselves to be a last choice.” Another suggested that she has started moving retreats and lock-ins further away from the church building and the community, so that there is not the pressure from youth and parents to come and go from them. She said, “They have to make a choice, and if they are going to participate, they will have to participate fully.” Several youth directors saw it as very important that their congregations were offering family worship opportunities in the middle of the week, suggesting that this could be a helpful accommodation to those who might be gone over the weekends.

These accommodations, however, were not always absolute, and they wor-

ried about making too many concessions, of letting sports and other activities determine the timing and duration of their programing. “I do try to be careful about the big events,” said one youth director, “but you cannot know every practice, game, tournament, and camp.” Further, she explained, “too much accommodation to one activity is not fair to the other youth who are not into sports, or into that specific sport.” They suggested that sometimes you have to do what you are going to do, and help students prioritize their activities in a way that one does not dominate to an unreasonable extent. This, too, is a learning experience for youth. “If they are too overly scheduled, they need to step back and see what the effects of this will be on their lives,” said one.

The overall assessment of the relationship between youth sports and youth ministry varied from one youth director to another. Some were rather pessimistic about the whole business, and suggested that this was a cultural battle that the church was losing, to the detriment of its ministry with youth. Another suggested: “We’re in a losing battle, and we cannot compete.” Yet most of the others were not quite so negative. They saw youth sports as one part in a problem for the attention and energy of youth and their families, and saw it as an important part of ministering to them—to help youth and parents deal with the expectations and the over-scheduling, and the sometimes obsessive youth sports culture. Understanding that these issues of balance and perspective were ones that would continue with youth into their adult lives, they saw this as an important ministry challenge, and one that would be extremely important for the church going forward. Most of them seemed cautiously upbeat and willing to rise to the challenges ahead. ⊕

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