

Living in Sports Culture

By Roger Lipe

How comfortably do you live in the culture of your sport? Does it fit like a well-worn batting glove or more like a size eight shoe on your size twelve foot? Do you find it relaxing or stressful? Do you speak its language and enjoy its nuances of gesture and posture or do you seem like an outsider? As you serve Christ in the world of sport, do you live in its culture and work to transform it or simply import Church culture into sport?

Can you speak the language of baseball with baseball players or do you speak Evangelicalese in the dugout? Do you find yourself at ease in the culture of football or do the footballers look at you like you don't belong on the pitch? Does the practice gym and all its sounds and smells seem pleasant to you or do they itch your soul like a bad sweater?

To import Church culture into the sport world is simpler, less costly and far less effective. It's easy to speak to players and coaches in the cloistered language of the Church, but it's really hard to communicate deeply that way. It's simple to tell stories about church leaders from the 18th century or the high profile player you saw on television last weekend, but it's much harder to listen intently and to watch closely the life of your team so as to speak their language and engage their hearts. It's quick, painless and trouble-free to tolerate the culture of sport in order to find a moment in which you can cram your canned presentation, it's but much less effective than building the relationships which allow you to speak clearly to the hearts of those who trust you.

To live in the sport culture is to wear its kit, to speak its language, to read its periodicals, books, journals and to listen to its prophets. The prophets of sport culture are most found in the newspapers, talk radio, sports magazines, on blogs or web sites. Can you hear them? Will you take the time to wrestle with the issues of daily life in sport? Do you have an answer to their questions? To live in the sport culture is to know its history, to respect its leaders and to relax in its sounds, sights, smells and emotions.

To be an agent of Christ's transforming power in sport culture is to demonstrate God-honoring values and to love people extravagantly in the daily life of sport. It's simply insufficient to tell Sunday School stories, to repeat tired clichés and to recycle last month's sermon for this week's chapel talk. If we speak of worship being something that happens exclusively within the walls of the church and exclude the activity of sport as an expression of genuine worship and praise to God, we miss our opportunity to help sports people experience real joy and fulfilment.

I would challenge you to do the same as many missionary leaders of past centuries and to take off the ill-fitting cultural trappings of the Church which only confuse and often repel those you seek to serve. Then begin to live in the culture of the sport in which you serve while striving to communicate the love of God in relevant terms. Above all, put on the character of Christ Jesus. Such character is broader than any culture, adapts well to any situation and transforms hearts and minds by the application of Truth and extravagant love.