

WHY ISTROUMA DOES SPORTS – TO DEAL WITH THE BROKENNESS IN SPORTS

Seemingly the 11 time All Star, MVP and four-time league scoring champion was poised for ‘legendary status’- one for the NBA record books. But his talent and potential were no match against his poor work ethic. Missed practices, tardiness to team events and on and off-court clashes with coaches and management staff eclipsed his skill. Controversy, violence, and imprisonment marred his personal life. He was traded and then traded again. Injuries sidelined him. Preferring to retire rather than spend time on the bench, he quit after only a few games. Sad story, true story, and unfortunately, his experiences and others like him reveal brokenness in sports.

Brokenness has always existed in sports – exposed by the imperfect people who play and the culture that promotes the game and players over character and integrity. Brokenness is revealed when winning becomes more important than how participants compete or when poor behavior is ignored or overlooked. Istrouma does sports in a way that deals with the brokenness in sports by focusing on the heart condition of everyone involved – players, coaches, officials, volunteers, and families. So, what areas of brokenness need to be dealt with?

Istrouma sports deals with the brokenness in sports caused by pride. Pride is a good thing for an athlete when it is based on satisfaction in doing something well or to the best of one’s ability. But pride that involves feelings of superiority over others, feeling like they know everything or making them think they are never in the wrong is pride that is displeasing to God. Dealing with pride starts with understanding who God is and why He deserves glory and not ourselves. This season, Istrouma Sports participants will have opportunities to combat pride as they give credit to God for the gifts and opportunities He has given them. Through Istrouma sports, participants will have occasions to learn how to recognize and applaud the contributions of each of their teammates and the accomplishments of their opponents. During the season, acknowledging the support and guidance of coaches will help ward off a prideful attitude. Players and coaches will defeat pride and honor God when they respond respectfully to officials’ directions and decisions.

Istrouma sports deals with the brokenness in sports caused by misguided priorities. It is doubtful that anyone participating in sports doesn’t care about the game’s outcome – pretty much everyone is “in it to win it”. But when the score becomes the main thing even if it means disregarding the rules, degrading other teammates, or demoralizing an opponent, then priorities are misguided. It may surprise you that God does care about the outcome of the game but maybe not in the way you think. He doesn’t wear our team colors and root for our team to win. Instead, His priority is how we play and respond to winning or losing games in ways that honor Him and respect others. Istrouma sports will help athletes and coaches shape their priorities so that giving 100% effort becomes more important than a win, playing fairly according to the rules more important than a championship, and being a good sport more important than having bragging rights. Most of all, Istrouma sports will help its participants put honoring God in what they say, think and do as their top priority.

Istrouma sports deals with the brokenness in sports caused by the pursuit of personal gain. MVP – every honest player will tell you that they strive for that title. Or maybe it’s getting maximum playing time or being the team leader. As humans, we strive for unique opportunities tailored to our wants and needs, and we long for recognition of accomplishments and compensation for our efforts. Istrouma sports is designed to provide opportunities for athletes and coaches to honor God by focusing less on personal gain and more on what is best for the team. That can be done in simple ways like encouraging more skilled or experienced players to partner with those who are not and being willing to give up playing time so others have a chance to get in the game. Honoring the accomplishments of every player and even opponents becomes more important than recognition of any one player or team. Istrouma Sports helps participants to understand that God has gifted each of them with unique abilities and talents designed to honor Him and put helping others ahead of any personal gain they could receive.

Pride, misguided priorities, and pursuit of personal gain have the potential to derail us whether in sports or in other areas of our lives. God’s plan is to use Istrouma sports to help us avoid those pitfalls and to learn ways that honor Him and help us to fulfil His plans and purpose for our lives.

DEVOTION PRAYER: Dear Heavenly Father, we are grateful that You have given us opportunities to participate in Istrouma sports. Help us not to let pride, our priorities or desire for gain hinder Your good plans for our lives.

WHY ISTROUMA DOES SPORTS – TO USE THE GIFTS GOD HAS GIVEN

Mission fields were probably at the top of the prayer list. Surely bigger buildings for groups to meet for Bible study were there, but spaces for basketball, football, volleyball, and fitness classes? Doubtful, even unthinkable. It's unlikely that in 1920 the original 16 charter members of Istrouma prayed for God to bless them with gifts of facilities for sports. But, out of all of the possibilities for programs and activities that the church could invest its time, energy, and finances, the gift of a sports ministry is exactly the type of mission field God had in mind as He looked 100 years into the future. So, why does Istrouma do sports?

Like any gift whose value increases when shared or used for the benefit of others, Istrouma does sports to use the gifts God has given. But sports at Istrouma are done a different way. Intentional opportunities to share the gospel and glorify God become more important than winning championships. Making disciples of Jesus Christ by offering opportunities for people from all backgrounds, races, cultures, abilities, and church affiliation is more valued than cultivating athletic aspirations. So, how does Istrouma Sports use the gifts God has given?

Istrouma uses the gifts God has given to present the gospel. Telling people that God sent His Son Jesus to pay the penalty for our sin is the reason Istrouma sports exists. This message was meant to be shared, but it doesn't have to happen within the walls of the church. At Istrouma, polished basketball courts rather than stained glass sanctuaries become another place to hear of God's holy love for each of us. The sin that separates us from God can be part of conversations shared on bleachers rather than cushioned pews. A Savior's sacrifice on the cross to pay the penalty for our sin can be learned at the concession stand instead of the church coffee shop. The message of promise of eternal life when a person asks Jesus to be their Savior can be delivered by a coach or game official instead of a preacher. God's lessons how to be His disciples may be taught in the form of a sports devotion or half-time prayer instead of a sermon or Sunday School lesson.

Istrouma uses the gifts God has given to grow its participants. Seemingly impenetrable obstacles to purchase land surrounding the church were demolished in God's hands. New buildings allowed for the repurposing of existing facilities perfect for indoor sports activities. Istrouma uses the gifts of these assets to provide sports opportunities for children and adults from all over the city of all skill levels not just the athletically elite or those confined to its church membership. On each court, every participant can grow mentally by learning about their sport and how it is played. They can become physically stronger, more agile, and healthier. Istrouma Sports facilities become a necessary resource in cultivating team membership. Most importantly, they are they are a tool that God can use to show participants how to grow spiritually as they participate in team devotions, prayer, and learning scripture.

Istrouma uses the gifts God has given to develop partnerships. Beyond basketball courts are God's gift of people who serve in the Istrouma sports ministry. Staff with sports and coaching experience partner with team coaches and officials to help build their leadership skills and to disciple them in their walk with God. Sport-specific commissioners partner with Istrouma staff to serve as managers of the season's activities. A gifted team of prayer warriors partner with the ministry to pray for families experiencing difficulties and storms in their lives. Over the years, God has opened doors for the ministry to move beyond the walls of the church to partner with schools, community leadership and local parks to provide Christ-centered sports experiences and equipment to youth who might not have these opportunities otherwise.

God is the ultimate gift giver. He gave us His Son Jesus, and He gave us a sports ministry. Both were never intended to be kept to ourselves but to be shared with others so that they would know how much He loves us.

DEVOTION PRAYER

Dear Heavenly Father,

We are grateful for the sports facilities You have given us to play on. We thank you for those who lead us as we play. Thank you for the many good gifts you have given us, but most of all, thank You for sending Your Son Jesus.

WHY ISTROUMA DOES SPORTS – TO BE A BRIDGE TO SHARING THE GOSPEL

Started in the early 1950's, completed in 1969 and spanning almost 24 miles, the Lake Ponchartrain Causeway was once the longest automobile bridge in the world. The two parallel spans of concrete and steel are marvels of construction. But their true importance lies in how they connect the communities of New Orleans and Mandeville. Travel between the two is more timely and safe for the nearly 20,000 vehicles that cross the bridge daily on their commute between the two cities. Not the only way to get from point A to point B, but ask any regular commuter, and they will tell you that they would choose the Causeway over the other alternatives.

Bridges are essential to our economies and our health and well-being. They protect us and link us to our families, our jobs, our schools, medical care, and other critical services. Did you know that God uses bridges to share the gospel of redemption through His Son, Jesus? Not the wood, concrete or steel kind of bridge, and if you asked them most people would say that God's bridges might look like church or Sunday School classes or Vacation Bible School or small group Bible studies. But one of the unique bridges He has given us is the gift of sports as a way to connect Him to us. So, how does Istrouma use sports as a bridge?

Istrouma uses sports as a bridge to share the gospel with individuals. During the season, Istrouma Sports players will spend a good bit of time and energy learning how to focus less on themselves and more on the good of the team. Does that mean that in Istrouma sports the individual is not important? No, because while God cares for your team, He cares more for you, the individual. When He sent His Son Jesus to die on the cross for our sins, it wasn't to be the Savior of teams but a personal Savior. To help you understand that Istrouma sports uses memorizing scripture verses to help us learn and remember what God has to say. Devotionals will be tools that speak to our hearts about His love and plans for us. Times for prayer will give us opportunities to talk with God building a one-on-one relationship with Him.

Istrouma uses sports as a bridge to share the gospel with families. Family support is a cornerstone for an athlete. Likewise, supporting families is a cornerstone of Istrouma sports. Church staff, coaches and other volunteers serve with Istrouma sports to make that happen. In Istrouma Sports, sharing the gospel with families not only includes telling them about Jesus, but it also means being the 'hands and feet of Jesus'. So, what might that look like? It may take the form of praying for or with them or offering words of encouragement when there are needs due to the challenges of living life. It may mean having someone to listen to them as they share problems or hurts they are experiencing. Or it might be connecting them to resources that would benefit them or helping them find a church where they can worship and serve God.

Istrouma uses sports as a bridge to share the gospel with our community. God has given us sports as a gift, and He has blessed Istrouma sports with the resources to share that gift beyond the campus of the church. Jesus' final command to His disciples before leaving earth was for them to move out of their comfort zone and tell others about Him. Istrouma sports follows that command by developing partnerships with school systems, other churches, and community groups and agencies. Sometimes that happens within its geographical borders and sometimes well beyond them. These partnerships are opportunities to help participants not only learn about a sport and acquire new skills but to learn about the love of God and His plan for their lives. For those who may not otherwise come to church or to a Bible study, Istrouma sees sports as a bridge to bring the love of Jesus to them.

Drivers using the Ponchartrain Causeway bridge typically have about a 25-30-minute drive time, but weather, accidents or repairs may cause them to choose an alternate route and bridge option. Similarly, God uses many alternate means to give people opportunities to learn about His love in sending His Son, Jesus. That might be in a church or Bible study or it just might be on a basketball court through a sports ministry.

DEVOTION PRAYER: Dear Heavenly Father, we are grateful that You use sports as a bridge to connect us to You. Through our participation in sports this season and through learning Your word, through devotions and prayer, help us to understand why Jesus came to the earth and why we need Him as our Savior.

WHY WE PLAY SPORTS – WE PLAY FOR JOY

No stat or accolade could be compared to the joy he found in playing with teammates who loved the game of basketball as much as he does.¹ You might think this young player with the New Orleans Pelicans would find joy in the fact that he received the NBA's 2019-2020 Most Improved Player trophy. Or maybe even in the fact that his performance on the court resulted in increasing scoring, rebounding and assists. Or perhaps increases in foul shooting and making three-pointers. But the joy Brandon Ingram found was based on playing alongside teammates devoted to the sport and who pushed him and themselves to continually improve their game.

Joy is the great pleasure we experience usually by getting something we want or desire, like for birthdays and Christmas. But joy shows up more often than that. Every day we have opportunities to experience joy in our routines and interactions with others if we look for it. God weaves joy into our lives through sports. One of the main reasons people play and watch sports is not in the hope of winning. Instead, people most often want to play and watch sports because it brings them enjoyment or 'joy'. So, what is it about sports makes us want to play for the joy they bring?

We play sports for the joy of being with friends and belonging. As humans, God created us with a desire for friendship and the need to belong to a group. It is a desire important to our health and happiness just like food and shelter are important. Being with friends and belonging to a group or community helps us to be connected to others and share life. Playing sports gives us opportunities to enjoy old friendships and make new ones. Our sports friends can encourage and support us as well as motivate us. They bring joy to us when they help us celebrate good times like winning games and go through hard times when we don't. Did you know that God desires a friendship with us? Jesus, God's Son, said that those who believed in Him were His friends. We can have great joy in knowing that as His friends, we belong to Him.

We play sports for the joy of working with others to achieve goals. Playing sports gives players and coaches opportunities to enjoy working together to accomplish goals better and faster than they could on their own. By learning to work together with teammates, players learn the value of cooperation and individual responsibility. Teams that work well with each other often enjoy successes they may not have imagined. Did you know that God encourages us to work together to accomplish our goals and His? We can experience joy when we are obedient to Him by putting others ahead of ourselves and looking after their interests, and by cooperating. That helps us not only achieve goals as a team but also the goal of pleasing Him.

We play sports for the joy in the benefits they give us. Through sports, we can enjoy benefits like improved physical and mental health, confidence, good social relationships and stronger personal skills like cooperation and leadership. God uses sports to give us benefits such as learning discipline and how to respect the authority of our coaches and parents. He works through sports to benefit us by developing our ability to learn how to win and how to persevere when we lose. He uses sports to help our patience and dedication become stronger which helps us enjoy our lives more. Did you know that God loves to give good benefits to us to enjoy, not just in sports but in every area of our lives? His greatest benefit for our joy was sending His Son Jesus to be our Savior.

Sports bring pleasure. They are just plain fun and produce joy whether we are a spectator or a participant. They bring joy through our friendships and joy in opportunities to work with others to accomplish goals. They infuse us with joy by giving us benefits that improve each area of our life. We can be grateful to God that whether we win, or we lose, for the way He delights in bringing us joy through sports experiences.

DEVOTION PRAYER:

Dear Father, Thank you so much for the joy that You give us when we participate in sports. We are grateful for the friends that we can play with and the opportunities we have to work together to reach our goals. We thank You for the many benefits You give us through sports. Help us to remember that our greatest joy is found in You and Your love for us.

1 <https://www.nba.com/pelicans/news/path-most-improved-player-award-was-most-fun-experience-brandon-ingram>

WHY WE PLAY SPORTS – FOR THE LOVE OF THE GAME

People will go to great lengths to have the opportunity to play on the hardwoods. Ingenuity makes a way for lovers of the game to play their favorite sport in the most unlikely places¹. You'll find courts in the coldest parts of Iceland, on decks of cruise ships, in caves and even on floating platforms and pagodas where land is scarce and offshore is the only option. Basketball equipment sales bear evidence of the love of the game, too. In 2019, more than \$230 million dollars were spent on basketballs, over \$181 million in backboards and an excess of \$41 million on other basketball accessories². Fans attending NBA games shell out anywhere from \$250 to almost \$500 per seat, and more than 15 million people watched the 2019 NBA championship. All this for the love of the game.

Love motivates us. It motivates us to see what is good about something or someone. It motivates us to invest in the significant people and things in our lives because of the love we have for them. We invest in playing and watching sports for the simple reason that we love the game. And God gave us the gift of sports for the simple reason that He loves us. He sees what is good in us. So, what is at the heart of why we love sports so much?

One reason is that sports give us the opportunity to compete. We are born with competitive natures that drives us to want to win and strive to be successful at what we try to accomplish. Players and coaches spend hours practicing drills, learning plays, and doing strength-building exercises. They live in hopeful anticipation that their hard work will culminate in that grand moment when a play is perfectly executed resulting in a score or preventing an opponent from advancing. God uses competing in our lives because it has the ability to help us build disciplines to do better. It is healthy as long as we have the right attitude of bringing glory to Him in our competitions. Did you know that Jesus understands what it feels like to compete against an opponent? When He spent 40 days in the wilderness, Satan tried to stop Him from beginning His ministry. But Jesus had spent many hours in training in God's Word which allowed Him to be victorious over His enemy.

Another reason we love sports is because it helps us to connect with others. Through sports, we are unified with family and friends, teammates, our school, our communities and maybe even people across our state. We share the same goals and identify with each other because our common objective is to see our team win. Through sports, we can discover that we are more alike than we are different. Strong bonds and traditions are born. Sports allow us to make our relationships with others stronger and makes connecting with new friends easier. Did you know that Jesus' purpose for coming to earth was to have relationships with us? In fact, the Bible says that when we trust Jesus as our Savior that we become part of Him, and that makes us connected to each other.

We love sports because it gives us opportunities for celebrating. Game day comes, a day unlike all the others. The celebrating starts even before the game begins. Out come our team shirts or jerseys, and we may even paint our faces in team colors. We break out the fan gear and prepare game snacks. We decorate our houses and our cars with images of the team mascot. The team fight song is sung over and over. Friends and family come over to watch the game or perhaps we travel to see the game live. Excitement and anticipation fill us up from the time game preparations are underway and last all the way through to the end and longer if our team wins. A good play is made, and the celebration erupts. If our team wins celebrating goes into hyper drive. Did you know that God celebrates us? The Bible tells us that He rejoices over us with gladness and He rejoices over us with singing. His celebrating is continuous and joyous and doesn't depend on whether we win, or we lose.

We pour ourselves into the game we love as we compete, connect with others, and celebrate. The cost of that love is measured through how much we sacrifice to be part of it. But God has made an even greater investment in us when He sent His Son, Jesus to be our Savior. The cost was very high, but He did it all for the love of you and me.

DEVOTION PRAYER:

Dear Father,

Thank you so much for the opportunity to compete, connect with others and celebrate the game we love. We are so grateful that You love us so much that you were willing to pay the price to save us when we trust in Jesus as our Savior. Please help us keep our eyes and our hearts focused on You and help us to love you with all of our hearts.

¹ <https://www.viralhoops.com/amazing-basketball-courts/>

² <https://www.statista.com/statistics/258582/basketball-sports-equipment-wholesale-sales-in-the-us/>

WHY WE PLAY SPORTS – WE PLAY TO COMPETE

The rivalry goes back all the way to 1970¹. The conflict was complete with the two teams frequently standing in the way of a potential win during regular season games as well as a shot at an NBA championship. During their fiercest competitive meetings key players were sometimes sidelined by their opponent. It wasn't unusual for star talent from one team to be eclipsed by seemingly less gifted players on the other. The less celebrated team outshone their competitors on the court and off. But even when the heat of competition was at its height, players on both teams acknowledged that their opponent made them play better.

Maybe we won't make a pro team lineup or win a national title, but all of us are built with a disposition for competing. We compete for recognition and honors, titles and victories, rewards and winnings. We engage in daily competition for the things that demand our time and attention. Like a coin, competing has two sides. One side is competing to destroy and demoralize an opponent and to win at all costs. On the other, is competing well by playing to the best of our ability and with integrity even when the outcome isn't a win. God uses our temperament for competing in sports because He knows the 'wins' we get from them if we compete well. So, what are those wins?

Competing helps us set goals. The point guard understands his/her job is to handle the ball to trigger his team's offense. Other players will position themselves to enable the shooting guard to score and the center to block the opponent. Because they know the goal, they can be more productive and successful in their attempts. Setting goals as we play sports helps us to stay focused on the objectives we want to accomplish. God uses sports to help us learn how to set goals because He knows they can help motivate us, help us persevere, and help us ignore distractions that would prevent us from achieving them. Did you know that God sees having goals as important? Jesus stressed the importance of setting goals when He shared the example of a builder whose goal was to erect a building and who used that goal to make wise plans to complete it.

Competing challenges us and others to do our best. Most pro players will tell you that they didn't make it to their level of play just because of their talent. In fact, most would say that it took giving their best through hard work and commitment to hours of drills, strength-building exercises, and endurance training before, during and off-season. Competing gives us opportunities to learn how to give our best which helps us achieve the goals we have for ourselves and for our team. Did you know that God wants us to do our best when we compete in sports? The Bible tells us that no matter what we do, we should do it with all our might. That means that whatever position or responsibility we are given, we should pour everything we have into doing our best. It also tells us that 'like iron sharpens iron', when we do our best, we are helping sharpen our teammates to do their best and to spur them on to greatness.

Competing allows us to use the talents and abilities God has given us. Players like Stephen Curry and Chris Paul have talent as point guards for their team, but you won't see them using their abilities to play the role of center. And you won't see forwards like LeBron James and Kevin Durant insist they be given the position of shooting guard. Each of these players has a specific talent and each plays a position designed to use that skill to achieve results. Did you know that each of you have talents and abilities that are God's special gift just for you? Those talents help accomplish His will for your good and the good of others. Competing through playing sports allows you to have opportunities to use your talents and abilities in ways you might not otherwise have through other activities.

Competing has a strong influence on us. We are motivated by it. Because of that, it has the ability to open the door for pride to infiltrate our hearts making us want to win at the expense of others regardless of the cost. But it also has the ability to improve us. As we learn how to set goals for ourselves and our team, give our best and use our talents and abilities, we can honor God by competing well.

DEVOTION PRAYER:

Dear Heavenly Father, thank You for the opportunities we have to compete. Thank you for the benefits that You give us to learn how to compete well. Help us to use our competing in ways that honor You.

¹<https://www.nba.com/suns/features/1970-playoffs-phoenix-suns-vs-los-angeles-lakers>

WHY WE PLAY SPORTS – WE PLAY TO GROW

A 75-80% hearing loss would be difficult to overcome in almost any profession. Add to that a diagnosis of obsessive-compulsive disorder, and you would think this player would never have made it past pee wee leagues much less make it to NBA status. And then there's the player who made it to the pro level even though his internal organs were reversed in mirror image in his body causing him to be susceptible to infections like pneumonia. Other pro players suffer from learning disabilities and dyslexia and poor performance in school. The challenges of players like Lance Allred, Magic Johnson and Randy Foye are different, but each of them embraced their opportunities putting in the extra work to help them grow into basketball elite¹.

From baby to adult, from kindergartener to graduate, from amateur to pro – we are designed to grow. Some growing happens automatically like growing taller, but some growing happens through our experiences in life. The Bible tells us that Jesus grew. We aren't sure if He played sports or not, but we do know that He grew in wisdom and stature and favor with God and man. We may never reach the level of play that Allred, Johnson and Foye did, but God will give us opportunities through sports to grow in ways like Jesus grew. So, in what ways can sports help us grow?

Sports help us grow in knowledge and wisdom. Knowledge is learning facts. Wisdom is taking the knowledge or facts that we know about the game and applying them. As a player or coach, we can learn the facts about the responsibilities of each of the player positions. We can study the different types of plays and learn which drills are the most beneficial in helping us get better. Our wisdom grows through practicing what we've learned and by disciplining ourselves to use that knowledge to benefit our teams. Did you know that as a boy, Jesus astounded the church scholars by what He knew about God? He grew in that wisdom and as an adult was able to apply God's word throughout His earthly ministry.

Sports help us grow physically. Sports help build our muscles and bones, but they are also beneficial to our heart function and blood circulation. They also help us build stamina, agility, and balance, not to mention keeping our weight in control. We may never be able to bench press 365 pounds like the pros, but God gives us opportunities through sports to grow physically stronger than we were before we started playing. Giving our best during practices and drills helps us get stronger. By committing to stretching and strengthening exercises, we grow. We know that Jesus had to be physically strong. He was trained by his earthly father, Joseph to do the hard work of a carpenter. But did you know that Jesus walked almost 22,000 miles during His ministry averaging about 20 miles per day?

Sports help us grow in favor with God and others. Finding favor with someone means that they accept us, approve of us, and give us their blessing. By listening and being respectful to those who lead us, like our coaches and parents, we gain their favor. This is especially true when we follow their directions without grumbling or complaining. When we are good sports and give others a fair shot at playing, we earn their favor. Congratulating our teammates and our opponents for good plays are other good ways we grow in favor with them. The same is true for God. When we are obedient to His commands and willing to submit to His authority, we find favor with Him. By loving others and looking for ways to benefit them, we gain God's favor. It is easy to see how Jesus found favor with others because He loved them and helped them. But did you know that Jesus found favor with God when He was obedient even to the point of being willing to go to the cross to die for our sins?

For us, sports are like the soil, water and sunlight that make plants grow. God uses the right ingredients in sports to nurture us to grow physically stronger and help us grow in knowledge and wisdom. But most important, He delights in using sports to help us grow stronger in our relationship with Him and with others.

DEVOTION PRAYER:

Dear Father, We are so grateful that You use the gift of sports to help us grow. Please help us to grow physically stronger through our games and practices. Help us to apply the knowledge and skills we are learning so that we are successful. Help us to live in a way that we honor and serve others. But most of all, help us to walk in ways that are pleasing to You so that we may find Your favor.

¹<https://www.thesportster.com/basketball/top-15-nba-players-who-overcame-disabilities/>

WHY GOD GIVES US SPORTS – TO REFLECT HIS IMAGE

Maybe our favorite team mascot is a Warrior or a Rocket, a Hawk, or a Hornet. Or maybe it's a leprechaun, racehorse, or a magic dragon. Most of us probably have shirts, hats, shoes, or banners bearing the image of our favorite team or mascot, and yes, leprechauns and magic dragons are real NBA mascots¹. From elementary school teams through high school and college leagues, we love our mascots. The images of our team mascot or our favorite player connect us to something that is important to us. When we wear them, it is a reflection of our association and loyalty to that team or that player. Other people know where our allegiance falls by the image we bear.

A person's image is like a picture – it makes an impression on others. An image is like a reflection because it has the ability to tell the story of who a person is and what they are like on the inside based on how they behave on the outside. It's human nature to want to be associated with things like sports teams and players who have an image we admire. That's why we wear team colors and likenesses of our favorite mascots and players, even artichokes or banana slugs. Image is very important to God. Humans are created in His image. When we trust Jesus as our Savior, God wants our image to reflect our connection with Him even in sports. So, how does He use sports to help us to reflect His image?

God uses sports to reflect His image through our words. Everybody knows that words have power even though they are just words, not sticks or stones. They have the power to help or hurt, build up or tear down, encourage, or discourage. Much of our image is based on the words we speak. Did you know that the Bible says that the words a person uses reflect what is in his or her heart? God can use sports to reflect His image by helping us speak gracious words to an opponent whose team beat ours and thankful words to coaches, parents, and officials for all of the time they dedicate to helping us be part of a team. We reflect God's image when we use encouraging words to a teammate who missed a play, to a coach who may be discouraged, or to an official who made a bad call. God's image shines through us when we use apologetic words when we didn't follow instructions, caused hurt, or didn't practice or play as hard as we should have.

God uses sports to reflect His image through our walk. Our 'walk' is about the attitudes and behaviors we exhibit. Much like our words, our walk gives a very clear image of who we are on the inside. Did you know that Jesus is the best example of having a walk that reflects God's image? His attitudes and His behaviors honored God by the way He treated others and remained obedient to God even when it was hard. Just like Him, when we give our best effort in practices and during games or by being willing to take on hard things that no one else will do, we reflect God's image. When we give our coaches, parents, and officials 100% of our attention and follow their directions, God's image is on display. We reflect His image through our dedication to learning new skills and plays even when they are hard. Sacrificing to give others an opportunity to play and being willing to applaud the success of a teammate or opponent are ways that God can reflect His image through our walk.

God uses sports to reflect His image through our wants. Let's face it, every player wants to be voted MVP – Most Valuable Player. Every player and coach want to be on the winning team, to be in first place, to win a championship. Every parent (or grandparent) wants their child to be the best on the team racking up recognition, trophies, and awards. But wants can consume us, make us insensitive to the wants or needs of others and render us oblivious to God's desires for us. Did you know that God is willing to work on our wants and gives us the power to do His will? When we want what benefits our whole team and not just ourselves, we reflect God's image. When our wants include hoping to see others be successful and to receive recognition even if we don't, God's image is reflected in us. Being willing to follow the directions of our coaches and officials even when we think they were wrong reflects God's image. Wanting to give our best even when we're tired or don't feel like it is another way God can reflect His image through us.

We go to a lot of effort and expense to bear the image of our favorite player or team even if the mascot is a magic dragon. This season, we have the opportunity to bear the image of God, not on a jersey or a hat but in our words, our walk, and the things we want. Just like our image is an important reflection of who we are, God's image reflects His immense love for us and the great sacrifice He made when He sent Jesus to be our Savior.

DEVOTION PRAYER

Heavenly Father, thank you so much that You give us opportunities in sports to reflect Your image. Please help us to mirror who You are in our words, our walk and in our wants. Please let Your image shine through us.

¹ <https://www.nbamascots.com/mascots>

WHY GOD GIVES US SPORTS – TO GIVE HIM GLORY

In the face of an unprecedented world-wide pandemic, Team LeBron and Team Giannis faced off in the 2020 NBA All-Star game in Chicago. There is a rigorous high bar of excellence set for any who would seek 'All-Star' status. Of the 450 pro basketball players only ten made the cut. Selection to this elite membership was determined by fan and current NBA players along with a media panel vote¹. Getting into the Basketball Hall of Fame² which recognizes players at the college and Olympic level and includes both men and women is even tougher. After a preliminary vote, names of contenders are sent to a Screening Committee, and if they make the cut their names are forwarded to an Honors Committee. In other words, to achieve 'All-Star' or 'Hall of Fame' status, the player has to be worthy of the glory that will be given them.

We all want to be recognized for the things that we do. When our hard work results in success, it is rewarding to know that others appreciate that effort. Any glory we get whether it is a pat on the back, an award, or a trophy makes us feel that what we achieved was well worth the time and energy we invested in it. Did you know that Jesus set the highest standard of excellence when He came to earth to be our Savior? He was able to accomplish for us what we could not do on our own by making it possible to have a personal relationship with God. Because of that, He is deserving of glory in every part of our lives including our time playing sports. So, how can we give God glory as we play this season?

In sports we can give God glory through our gifts. Spotting a gifted athlete is easy. They run up court, shoot, tip, block, or maneuver better than all the others. However, who gets the glory as they use those gifts is not always as easy to see. God gives each of us special gifts in the form of talents and interests, skills and abilities. Employing those gifts with excellence is an opportunity to show who God is and a way to give Him glory. If you are talented athletically and you work hard to sharpen and execute your skills, God is glorified. If you are a coach or team leader determined to lead with integrity, God gets the glory. If you are skilled in forming relationships with others and use your talents to encourage and challenge your teammates, glory goes to God. When you are gifted with compassion and extend grace to an opponent or an official who maybe didn't make the best of calls, God is honored and glorified.

In sports, we can give God glory through our gaffes. In practice, sometimes everything is perfect. But during the game with the winning score on the line, the ball may tip the rim of the goal and end up in the hands of the opposing team. Game over. The shooter's gaffe, or blunder, is out there for all the world to see. Any hope of glory lost. All of us make mistakes or gaffes they are opportunities to bring glory to God are never lost depending on how we handle them. When we are willing to admit our mistakes and not blame others when we mishandle a play or miss a shot, we give God glory. Apologizing for our mistakes and not trying to cover them up or ignore them is another way God is honored. Encouraging another player whose blunder significantly impacted the outcome of the game glorifies God. Being willing to make amends when we have wronged another teammate or opponent by our words or actions is another way to give glory to God.

In sports, we can give God glory through our gatherings. Unless its golf or singles tennis or pickleball, chances are most athletes will play as a member of a team. And, when we gather together as a team there are unique opportunities to glorify God beyond those we have individually. When teammates acknowledge and value the contributions of all players recognizing that games are not won by a single individual, they glorify God. Working together and being committed to respecting the opinions of others is a way that teams honor God as they gather for games and practices. When teammates take responsibility for their share of the work to be done, encourage one another and have each other's backs, God gets the glory. God receives glory when teams exhibit good sportsmanship and are willing to acknowledge the skill and effort of each other and their opponents.

Whether or not there are awards, championships, and trophies ahead of us, one thing is certain. God recognizes us and sees great value and excellence in us. We don't have to go through a rigorous process or meet a certain standard to get His approval or His love. When we trust Him as Lord and Savior, we are automatically inducted into His eternal hall of fame. For that, He deserves our glory through our gifts, our gaffes, and our gatherings

DEVOTION PRAYER

Dear God, we are grateful for the opportunity to give You glory as we play. We are grateful that You love us just as we are and that there is nothing we can do to earn Your love and nothing we can do to lose Your love.

¹<https://www.nba.com/article/2020/01/23/2020-all-star-starters-official-release>

²<https://www.nba.com/history>

WHY GOD GIVES US SPORTS – TO HELP US PERSEVERE

He is on record for being the shortest player in NBA history. But Muggsy Bogues persevered and went on to play at the pro level for fifteen years¹. For other players, potentially sidelining injuries could have prevented them from returning to play, but they persevered.² For other players, the challenges may have been with them from their earliest days stemming from poverty and parental drug abuse, loss of a key family member and political unrest in their native countries³. For some, the challenge was self-inflicted. When Rex Chapman succumbed to the influence of drugs, his career seemed over. But he persevered and went on to become the director of personnel with the Denver Nuggets⁴. The stories of their challenges are different, but perseverance is the common denominator binding their stories together.

You can't go too far into your day before pressures, problems and potential derailment show up. We can't get rid of the challenges that are part of life, but we can learn to persevere through them. This means that we make the decision to continue to do or achieve something despite difficulties. The Bible talks about the troubles of the world and that through them we can learn to persevere. God uses His gift of sports because of their unique ability to help us learn how to persevere. So, what might perseverance look like as we play sports?

Perseverance means we commit not quit. Practices are rough so we feel like skipping them. Learning new skills and plays seems complicated and impossible. Making a mistake on a play makes us feel like losers. Being friends with teammates isn't always friendly. The whole idea of being on the team makes us want to quit. But when we make the decision to stay committed to the game, to our play, and to our team, regardless of how hard it may seem, we persevere. Being determined to tackle all of the hard things makes us and our team stronger. Persevering makes us winners even if the score at the end of the game doesn't show it. Did you know that Jesus persevered? He didn't quit when people didn't believe Him and made fun of Him. He didn't stop walking miles across rugged terrain to help people. He didn't give up on loving those who didn't love Him. Instead, He committed His love for us by going to the cross to die for our sins.

Perseverance builds character that's strong not wrong. One of the results of perseverance is its potential to build our character. It can help us become more patient and forgiving of other players, coaches, and officials when they make a mistake, a bad play or call because we understand how that feels. We better understand the need to sacrifice our play time so that others have opportunities to be in the game and do well and may find it easier to acknowledge the effort and successes of our teammates and coaches. If our team loses, perhaps we will be more willing to sincerely congratulate our opponents. Did you know that God's strong character shows His perseverance in loving us? He is patient with us and willing to forgive our mistakes. He was willing to sacrifice His Son for us, and His word acknowledges how precious we are to Him. And He gives great blessings to us even when we don't deserve them.

Perseverance leads to hope not a slippery slope. Hope is the desire to see a certain thing happen. We hope that we can learn all of the plays and execute them well. We hope that we can make a big play and score for our team. We hope that we can be a good teammate. We hope that our team will win. But the type of hope built through perseverance is not just the slippery slope of 'wishful thinking'. It is more like confidence. If we persevere and don't quit, we can be confident that learning new skills and plays will be possible. If we commit to doing our best at practices and games and diligently follow the instructions of coaches and officials, we have more confidence in our ability and that of our team to do well. Did you know that our hope in God isn't doesn't have to be wishful thinking? The Bible says that we can be confident that God loves us. We can be confident that God will always be with us. We can be confident that He promises never to leave us even we fail or make mistakes.

Stories of perseverance inspire us. They give us hope that life can be better in spite of challenges if we stay committed. God uses sports to help us learn to persevere, and in the process, build our character and confidence in Him.

DEVOTION PRAYER

Heavenly Father, thank You for persevering in Your love for us. We are grateful that you are totally committed to loving us and that You don't give up on us. Help us to learn how to persevere when we face challenges. Please build strong, Godly character in us and remind us of the confident hope we have in You.

¹<https://bleacherreport.com/articles/2628096-20-little-guys-who-overcame-the-odds>

²<https://www.thesportster.com/basketball/top-15-nba-players-who-overcame-devastating-injuries/#:~:text=Top%2015%20NBA%20Players%20Who%20Overcame%20Devastating%20Injuries,Crawford%3A%20Torn%20ACL%20%26%20Meniscus.%20More%20items...%20>

³<https://www.thesportster.com/basketball/10-nba-players-who-come-from-rough-backgrounds-and-10-who-had-an-easy-life/>

⁴https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rex_Chapman

WHY GOD GIVES US SPORTS – TO TRANSFORM US

His team's ranking was so low that it couldn't be placed in his own father's national draw tournament. Smaller and slimmer than most players, he wasn't able to secure a scholarship to his own parent's alma mater. But, when he was given the chance to use more of his long-range shooting skill, that's when Steph Curry's transformation began¹. Following a number of collegiate awards and recognitions for his skill, he was primed for NBA success becoming a leader in the three-point scoring arena. But Curry's true transformation came when he gave his life to Christ as a young teenager². Outspoken about his faith, this star uses his position to take advantage of opportunities to tell others about God's love on the court and off.

A caterpillar to butterfly is likely what most people think when they hear the word 'transformation'. But it's bigger than that; it's an integral principle in how our world operates including in sports. Sports novices are transformed when they train hard and fill their position well because they have learned the rules of the sport. Plays that once felt clumsy are transformed through continuous practice until they are executed with ease. Individual players working together over time find themselves transformed into a cohesive team. So, how does God use sports to transform us? Of course, there are physical transformations in strength and agility, but like a butterfly, the biggest transformation happens on the inside.

God uses sports to transform us mentally. Since we aren't born with natural abilities to know about sports, we have to learn about them and how they are played. Each sport has a specific set of rules that players and coaches must learn in order to play well. God uses sports because they have the ability to challenge us intellectually in ways that other activities don't, and He is willing to help us tackle those challenges to bring about our mental transformation. Often there is a language, sports-specific words or terms that we may not understand or know how to use. He uses them to transform our concentration skills because they require focus on the complexity of plays and how they can be executed well. Sports help transform our ability to think logically and strategically so players are always needing to think ahead to the next move or play and what they can do better as opportunities present themselves during the next game.

God uses sports to transform us relationally. Team sports is about relationships – those among players, with coaches and officials and with opponents. Playing on a team requires a shift from focusing on self to that of how the team can work together. God uses sports to transform our life skills by helping us learn to be more cooperative with one another, as well as learn how to share and give up our rights for the benefit of another. Relational transformation occurs when we learn how to forgive mistakes of ourselves, teammates, and opponents. Working with others to achieve a common goal is another way that God uses sports to transform us relationally. Sports also allows us opportunities to learn from and be challenged by other players and teams who may be better than we are or have skill levels that we want to achieve.

God uses sports to transform us spiritually. Through sports, God gives us opportunities to express our relationship to Him, and of course to others. When we have trusted Jesus as Savior, sports can transform our witness to one that points to all that God has done for us. That would mean recognizing God has given us everything and giving Him credit when we do well and by praising Him even when we didn't. Sports can also be a tool that God uses to transform our reliance on self and our own strength and abilities to relying on Him. God can also use sports to transform us spiritually by helping us align our attitudes, actions, and aspirations to be more in line with what He wants for us. When the losses occur or a play muffed, God can use those circumstances to draw us closer to Him and learn to trust Him for what is best for our lives. But most of all, because of the example of Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross, God can use sports to transform our hearts as we sacrifice our wants and desires for the good of others on our team.

Unlike the butterfly's transformation God's work in transforming us lasts our lifetime. For a butterfly, the transformation lasts about 28 days after which they remain in that state for good. God's love for us would not allow Him to leave us as we are. His greatest transformation work in our lives is to help us to live and be like His son, in sports and in every other thing we put our hands and hearts to.

DEVOTION PRAYER

Dear Heavenly Father, we are so grateful that you are willing to transform us, not just in sports but in every area of our lives. Please help us to be willing to work with You in these transformations and to honor You and love others.

¹<https://seattlemedium.com/the-transformation-of-steph-curry/>

²<https://www1.cbn.com/cbnnews/2019/june/steph-curry-explains-moment-he-truly-became-a-christian-and-lsquo-gave-my-life-to-christ-rsquo>