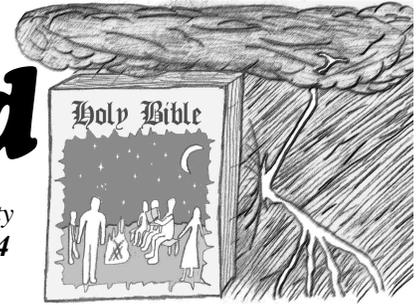


Shelter in the Word

He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty
You are my refuge and shield: I have put my hope in your Word. —Psalm 91:1; 119:114



Vol. 3, No. 1

Helping you become self-sufficient in the Word—for a lasting relationship with the Almighty

Jan/Feb 2000

Athletics—What Does the Bible Say?

by Norman Edwards

Christian parents frequently have questions about school or community athletic programs:

1. Should Christians be involved in athletics at all?
2. Are there certain sports that are “acceptable” and others that are “not”?
3. Are there certain coaches and teams that are “acceptable” and some that are not?
4. How does a parent deal with conflicts between athletics, schoolwork, and family activities?
5. How does a parent deal with conflicts between athletics, the Sabbath and other religious activities?

The very fact that parents have these questions is a good sign. The existence of these questions shows that the parents are neither using athletics as a “babysitter” nor regarding them as the most important thing in their lives. If parents are glad to see their child spend as much time as possible in athletics because they cannot get along with their child at home, they urgently need to examine their relationship and change it. On the other hand, if Christian values, schoolwork, family activities and religious activities always take a back-seat to athletic priorities, sports may have indeed become a false god in your life.

Eternal Judgment Appendices Finally Ready!

Distribution of *Shelter in the Word* was halted while I finished the appendices to *What Does the Bible Say About Eternal Judgment?* The appendices and a new title/table of contents page are included with this mailing (along with the Jan/Feb, Mar/Apr & May/June issues of *Shelter in the Word*). Please throw away your old “Eternal Judgment paper” title/table of contents page, and replace it with the new one. Then add the new appendices to the end. If you do not have a copy of *What Does the Bible Say About Eternal Judgment?*, please ask for one via the address on the back page. —Norman Edwards

Should Christians Be Involved In Sports at All?

The Bible contains no clear statement telling believers to either avoid or participate in athletics. History teaches us that athletics played a very minor role in ancient Hebrew society compared to the fairly prominent role it had in Greek and Roman societies. The “top” Greek athletes competed in the nude, and were nearly worshipped by their countrymen. The situation was far from righteous. Some sports today are almost as bad, but most are not.



Books are available that make a great effort to link modern sports to Egyptian, Babylonian or especially Greek and Roman religions. There is no doubt that some connection exists. The modern-day Olympics certainly descended from the ancient Greek Olympics. Other modern sports may have borrowed certain elements from ancient sports that may have had religious significance in that day. Some anti-sports people will go as far as to say that since balls (spherical objects) and hoops were used as ancient pagan sex symbols, that God-fearing people should not use them at all today. But the truth is, the Creator of the Universe made spheres and hoops (the planets and their rings) long before there were any pagans. Just because a certain naturally-occurring thing was used by non-Christians does not mean that it is forever unusable by Christians.

The Eternal commands His people not to worship other gods (Deut 13) or to try worship Him with the practices used in false religions (Deut 12:30-31). However, there is no command in the scripture to avoid the use of words, ideas or inventions of pagans in everyday life. For example, the ancient Israelites were

told not to worship the false god, Baal, but they conquered many cities that have the word “Baal” in them. God never commanded them to rename the cities, so the “Baal” names continued to be used—even by the Bible writers. Both the Bible and archeology show many similarities in architecture, farming, pottery, language, etc., between the Israelites and the surrounding heathen nations. The Israelites were not condemned for these things, but only for *actually engaging in false worship* and for *mistreating their own countrymen*.

Nearly everyone involved in sports today does not see them as part of a religion. Virtually no one prays to sports figures or believes that they have immortality or supernatural power. Few people will claim that “God is on the side” of a particular team. Indeed, the players of any one sport almost certainly hold a wide variety of religious beliefs: Christian, Muslim, atheist, agnostic, etc.

Do sports sometimes absorb the time, enthusiasm and zeal that God wished people would dedicate to Him? Yes! That is probably the most important issue to deal with. Throwing a ball or running faster than the next person is not an “evil act of false worship”, but sports can take the time and energy we should devote to the true God. In that sense, it can become a “false god”. We will address that issue in a couple of sections. But first, let us simply see what the Bible says about athletics in general.

Bible Verses About Athletics

About the only verse that directly talks about believers being involved in athletics is this one:

1Tim 4:8 **For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.**

While this verse is very short, its message is extremely profound: There is “some value” in athletics, but “godliness” is much more valuable. If there is any one lesson someone can learn from this article, it is in this verse. This principle applies to many other things we could strive to obtain: additional education, better personal hygiene, better clothes, more frequent house cleaning, new tools, an addition to our home, etc. All of these things have some value, but are not as valuable as “godliness”. When we plan to do these things, we should plan to do them in a way that will help us and others live more Christ-like lives.

The Bible contains many references to races and other types of sports—mostly as comparisons to the struggles we face as individuals. Notice these three references in the Old Testament. The first one actually compares the heavens that the Creator made to a champion racer:

Pslm 19:1 The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.

4 Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world. In the heavens he has pitched a tent for the sun,

5 which is like a bridegroom coming forth from his pavilion, **like a champion rejoicing to run his course.**

Ecll 9:11 I have seen something else under the sun: **The race is not to the swift** or the battle to the strong, nor does food come to the wise or wealth to the brilliant or favor to the learned; but time and chance happen to them all.

Shelter in the Word is designed to help people become self-sufficient in their Bible study, so that they may be able to serve the Almighty Creator, and receive salvation through His Son. *Shelter* is not affiliated with any denomination, and teaches that eternal life is available to **individuals** who live by the Bible, regardless of their belonging to a church organization.

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Jer 12:5 **If you have raced with men on foot** and they have worn you out, how can you **compete** with horses? If you stumble in safe country, how will you manage in the thickets by the Jordan?

If there are other verses mentioning athletics, this writer cannot find them. When compared to the size of the Old Testament, sports is mentioned only minimally.

In the New Testament, the apostle Paul frequently uses athletics—especially racing—as a comparison to the Christian life. Ten passages follow. It may be a lot of reading, but if you read through them all, you will have read nearly all that the Bible says in regard to athletics.

Acts 20:24 However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only **I may finish the race** and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace.

1 Cor 9:23 I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.

24 Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but **only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize.**

25 Everyone who **competes in the games** goes into strict training. **They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever.**

26 Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air.

27 No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified **for the prize.**

Gal 2:2 I went in response to a revelation and set before them the gospel that I preach among the Gentiles. But I did this privately to those who seemed to be leaders, for fear that **I was running or had run my race in vain.**

Gal 5:7 You were running a good **race**. Who cut in on you and kept you from obeying the truth?

Phlp 2:16 as you hold out the word of life—in order that I may boast on the day of Christ that **I did not run or labor for nothing.**

Phlp 3:14 **I press on toward the goal to win the prize** [the Greek *brabeion* means a prize from an athletic competition] for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.



2Tim 2:5 Similarly, **if anyone competes as an athlete**, he does not receive the victor's crown unless he competes according to the rules.

2Tim 4:6 For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure.

7 I have fought the good fight, I have **finished the race**, I have kept the faith.

8 Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day-- and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.

Heb 12:1 Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and **let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.**

2 Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

From the above verses, we cannot conclude that Paul is promoting sports. On the other hand, it is hard to believe that he thinks all athletics are evil—he seems

to expect his readers to know about them. I, the writer of this article, can honestly say that Paul's writings have much more meaning since I actually participated in high school football and cross-country running. Knowing the many hours of practice and training required to be ready to compete, and knowing the utter determination and exhaustion required to see an event through, is simply not the same as just watching a sport or reading about it.

It is certainly not mandatory that one be an athlete to understand Paul—Paul makes many other analogies and explains himself in many other ways. But learning lessons from sports can, if properly applied, be helpful in understanding what is required of a believer.

Where Do Athletics Fit In Our Lives?

We do not think we can over-emphasize what Paul said too much, so we will print that verse again:

1Tim 4:8 For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.

Any manner of athletics should never replace the two great commandments:

Matt 22:37 Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind."

38 This is the first and greatest commandment.

39 And the second is like it: "Love your neighbor as yourself."

Also, athletic talent is not one of the "spiritual gifts" mentioned in the Bible (Rom 12:6-8; 1Cor 12:7-11; 28-31; Eph 4:11-15; 1Pet 4:8-11). It is a physical gift. "Giving liberally" is a spiritual gift (Rom 12:8). If someone earns a lot of money from athletics and gives liberally to support something God is doing, then it could be a spiritual gift. But a young person hoping to "make a lot of money" in a sport some day needs to be realistic about the possibility of actually doing that.

A person who is "one of the better players" on a high school team still has a relatively low chance of playing on a college or semi-professional team—and a very low chance of playing professionally. A person in a larger high school that is "one of the most skilled that ever came through that school" has some chance of earning a lot of money some day, and if they are so

motivated, using it to help others serve God in some way.

No matter how much money one makes or gives to a worthy cause, everyone must realize that God is not "bought off". Individuals cannot neglect living a Christian life, helping and serving others as God directs. If this is true for all jobs, how much more true is it for school athletics with only a slight possibility of a job in the future?

Nevertheless, **athletics** can be a great personal learning experience and preparation for the future.

The **positive aspects** of sports are the self-control, skill, strength, drive, teamwork, organization, humility, compassion and other attributes needed to be successful at many of life's tasks. The physical conditioning is also of value. A body "in shape" lives longer with less illness and is able to accomplish other tasks much better than one "out of shape".

The **negative aspects** of sports include aggression, over-competition, injury and time taken away from other good things. Injuries can come about in a great variety of ways and can be short term or last a lifetime.

Are Certain Sports Unacceptable?

Sports vary greatly in just about every way, and it is not really reasonable to "lump them all together". Some sports, such as track, golf, bowling, diving, etc. are **not directly competitive**—the athletes compete against time and physical challenges, then simply compare scores. Each participant focuses on doing the best job he or she can—**not** on making the other players do worse. Sometimes, those who compete in these sports are the best of friends and deal with each other in an encouraging manner even while they are competing: they want to do their personal best, but also want to compete against the very best that others can do.

At the opposite extreme are combat sports, such as boxing and some types of martial arts, where each contender hopes to win by injuring or disabling the other. Some people (usually men) just seem to have a desire to play rough games and risk personal injury for a chance to win a game by injuring somebody else. Worse yet, there is a much larger group of people who seem to enjoy watching this kind of thing. Unfortunately, this idea is not at all new:

2 Sam 2:12 Abner son of Ner [a military general], together with the men of Ish-Bosheth [trying to make himself King] son of Saul, left Mahanaim and went to Gibeon.

13 Joab son of Zeruah and David's men went out and met them at the pool of

Gibeon. One group sat down on one side of the pool and one group on the other side.

14 Then Abner said to Joab, "Let's have some of the young men get up and fight hand to hand in front of us." "All right, let them do it," Joab said.

15 So they stood up and were counted off—twelve men for Benjamin and Ish-Bosheth son of Saul, and twelve for David.

16 Then each man grabbed his opponent by the head and thrust his dagger into his opponent's side, and they fell down together. So that place in Gibeon was called Helkath Hazzurim.

These verses are part of a larger story describing a war when Ish-Bosheth, the son of the deceased King Saul, rebelled against David. Abner and Joab were generals on opposite sides, but knew each other well. Rather than talking about a peaceful way to end the conflict, they agreed to this organized "sporting fight" and killed 24 young men. The Romans became famous for their arenas, gladiators and "fight to death" sports—sometimes man against man, other times man against animals. (Paul was actually forced to fight "wild beasts"—1Cor 15:32). "Fight to the death" sports still exist today, but are usually illegal, so they are not well publicized. **Obviously, these sports that are designed to kill and injure violate the sixth commandment: "You shall not murder"** (Ex 20:13).

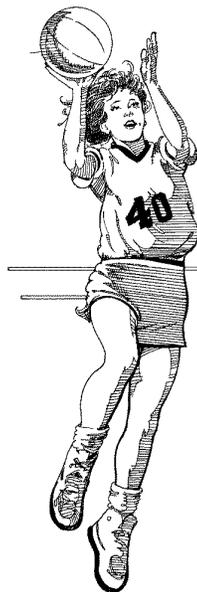
Most sports fall somewhere between the lone diver trying to make the perfect dive, and the boxers in the ring trying to knock each other out. Tennis, volleyball and other sports involve direct competition between players, but not direct contact. Basketball and soccer involve quite a bit of physical contact, but only as is necessary to control and shoot the ball. Penalties are assessed for unnecessary or dangerous physical contact.

Sports like ice hockey and football border on the dangerous side. They have rules designed to make the games safer and to avoid injury, but their very nature makes injury likely. It is frequently a game objective for one player to run into another player at high speed, knocking him over. A player that "hits the other guy twice as hard as necessary" is probably considered a "good player" and will not be penalized. While the injury and disablement of other players is not a publicly stated objective in these sports, game insiders know

that injury sometimes is a method whereby teams hope to win.

Most Christians realize that they should not be involved in boxing and martial arts sports where the contenders are supposed to win by injuring the other person. Participation in the "in-between" sports mentioned in the previous paragraph probably depends upon the playing environment. A certain good football league may be safer than a bad basketball league.

The good versus the bad of a sport has to be weighed just like any of life's other decisions. Working as a clerk in a store is probably better than sitting at home doing nothing in most cases. However, if a store is frequently robbed and its clerks have been killed and injured in the process, then staying at home might be better than taking the job. Everyone probably knows at least one true story about someone who was severely injured in a sport. If they think about it, everyone probably also knows a story of someone whose life changed for the good when he or she began participating in a sport (he or she lost weight, stopped bad habits, organized their life, made friends, etc.).



Are Certain Coaches or Teams Unacceptable?

While the rules for various sports are almost always documented in great detail, **the methods used by different coaches and the atmosphere found among varying teams can be as different as night and day.** These are things that a Christian should evaluate before participating in a sport. There are several areas:

Play To Your Potential vs. Win At All Costs.

This concept relates to the previous section. There are coaches and players who want to win so badly they will gladly break the rules or do anything that they "can get away with" in order to win—including injuring opposing players. A basketball team can sometimes win by out-shooting and out-defending the other team, and can sometimes win by disabling the best players on the other team by intentionally sticking elbows in their faces when they jump for rebounds. On the other hand, there are coaches of potentially-violent football and hockey teams who teach, "we want to play well and we want to win—but only if we can do that without injuring anyone on either side". That is the attitude that athletes should have.

Toasting and Boasting. Some teams, players and coaches spend far too much time and effort proclaiming their own greatness, which is in conflict with the humble, serving approach taught in Scripture. This is especially true for younger, more impressionable athletes. It is natural to cheer when games are won and

be sad when games are lost. But when spectators, coaches and players tell the victors that “they are the greatest” to the point that they begin to believe it, athletics has lost its way. Sports is something to help prepare people to do worthwhile things—not the ultimate vanity trip.

Phlp 2:3 Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.

Morality and Language. Some sports teams, have a reputation for clean conduct and language. Some teams pride themselves on “taking young people out of the gutter and cleaning them up”. They may use biblical principles in their coaching. On the other hand, some coaches and players think that foul language and immorality make them “tough guys” and actually encourage it as long as it does not get them “in trouble”. League rules prevent most amateur athletes from being paid—so some coaches will clandestinely arrange sex partners to “reward” their best players. And finally, there are sports organizations have a “hands-off” policy to morality that goes something like this: whatever a player does outside the practice and playing fields is his or her own business.

All of these areas must be evaluated when one is considering participating on a team. The character and approach of the coaches and other players can make all of the difference. Asking “should I join this team?” might be compared to asking “should I take this construction job?” Construction work can be dangerous, but does not have to be. So can sports. Either experience can be beneficial or awful based on the other people involved.

Dealing with Time Conflicts

One of the biggest problems with competitive athletics is the amount of time consumed. For example, basketball was invented as a non-boring way to stay in good physical shape while remaining indoors. Later, some people found this exercise exciting enough to watch. Today, people go, even pay, to watch others play at all levels, from junior high to college to professional. Entire books have been written on small aspects of the game such as dribbling or free-throw shooting. What started as recreation and conditioning has become a finely-tuned science and art—which essentially consumes as much time as is humanly available for those involved.

Jokes abound regarding college athletes who major in, “general studies”, “basket weaving” or some other simple subject because they are spending nearly

all of their life practicing or playing their sport. Even at the junior high level, students may practice for several hours every day after school, and are encouraged to practice “on their own” more at other times. Indeed, strategies of some team sports may exceed the complexity of anything else a young person learns in school. Yet, only a tiny percentage of those who spend thousands of hours in pre-college athletics will every play in college or earn significant money from their efforts.

If one finds an acceptable coach and team for a sport that he or she wants to participate in, balancing time priorities is likely to be the major issue.

For a person in high school or junior high, joining a team for the first time can be one of the biggest commitments they will make—comparable to taking a job for the first time. It will impact the entire family. This in itself is not bad, but how the matter is handled is important. A lesson from Jesus is in order:

Luke 14:28 For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and **count the cost**, whether he has *enough* to finish *it* (NKJV).

Time to be on a sports team will require less idle time, a more organized approach to school work, and possibly the discontinuing of other activities. All of these things are good. On the other hand, meals and other times that families spend together may become more difficult to bring to pass because “Jane or Joe is always at practice”. This can be especially difficult if there are several family members in different sports leagues. Parents in some areas can spend hours per week just driving to and from practices. On the other hand, it can be difficult if some family members are on sports teams and others are not—the ones at home may complain that others are too often gone when there is work to be done.

There are no easy answers to these questions. But answering them is excellent training for the rest of life. They need to be openly discussed, and the person involved in sports needs to “**count the cost**”—all of it. If certain family tasks are divided among the family members, they need to understand they must do their share when practice is over. If certain family times are deemed by the parents to be more important than the athletic practices or events, then the participant needs to realize that they may miss some and tell their coach up front. **One of the greatest lessons that can be learned is to keep commitments that one makes, and to not make commitments that one cannot keep.**

Commitments to God are very similar to family commitments. The purpose of athletics should always be to make one more effective for Christ, not to crowd out one's commitment to Christ.

What should a person do when games or practices take place at the same time as a church service or activity? Some people simply set priorities. For example: church services, Bible studies, and certain other activities are more important than sports and always take priority over sports games and practices. On the other hand, church entertainment activities are less important than the commitment to sports. Coaches should be informed of these priorities in advance. It is not fair for them to find out part way through the season that a player they have invested a lot of time in never planned to be available for certain events.

The situation can be further complicated by families that follow the Biblical example of resting one day per week:

Ex 20:8 "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.

9 Six days you shall labor and do all your work,

10 but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates.

Matt 12:8 For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath."

Many professional trainers recognize the benefits of resting one day—it gives muscles and tissues a chance to mend and strengthen. But sporting events don't always take into account Sabbath-resting, so there is often a need to miss some events. There are the other questions of: Should I travel to an event on the Sabbath? Should I get dressed for it on the Sabbath? Can I go over the game plan in my mind?

The Bible does not give specific answers to each of these questions. But it does teach:

1Cor 10:31 So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.

Rom 14:23 ... for whatever is not from faith is sin.

There is a tremendous desire, when one is a part of a team, to put the team first. But God wants us to put

Him first. Our way of life should be evident to others. Attending a Bible study on a rather dry subject may seem less important (and certainly less exciting) than helping the team win a "big game". Nevertheless, in a few years, everyone will probably have forgotten about that "big game"—but knowledge of God endures forever.

The Role of the Parent

Parents often wonder: "How much should I "make" my child to do and how much should I let them decide?" Some parents would say that they should never let their child do anything that would be against their rules or against God's way. But all a parent can control is outward actions. A parent cannot stop their child from thinking about their sport—even when the child is in a church service. God wants our hearts and minds.

The job of a parent is to take a baby, for which they must do everything, and within about 18 years, train that child to learn to make decisions for his or herself. Some parents try to make every decision for their child until



they leave home or rebel. Others let children do what they want before they have enough knowledge to make a decision. Parents need to set their children a good example, teach them from the Bible, then let their children make decisions that will not be disastrous, but ones that they can learn from. Look at the way God deals with the people who call themselves Christians. It is obvious that He lets them make a great many mistakes and suffer for it.

In all these things, children need to be taught to pray about important decisions and ask God what they should do:

1Jn 3:22 And whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight.

1Jn 5:14 This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.

It is much better that parents let children participate in athletics with the promise that they will keep up family and church commitments, than it is for them to tell the children, “No you could not possibly do that”. Young people need safe doses of reality, not to be told that they cannot even try.

The Paradox of Athletics

At its worst athletics can 1) encourage fighting and violence in people, 2) take their time away from worshiping God and doing more important things and 3) actually replace God in people’s lives.

At its best, it can be a wonderful training tool and energy outlet for energetic young people—preparing them to make life decisions and to work with all their might. It can instill a sense of diligence and accomplishment that otherwise might not occur until much later in life.

The paradox enters in when we consider the public expression of God in our secular society. As far as our mass media is concerned, God seems to exist only at religious events and in the minds of “church professionals”. If God is to have an influence in one’s life, it apparently must happen at church or other religious gathering, through a Christian radio station or bookstore, or in some other “Christian” fashion. Public

prayers are virtually always uttered by a religious professional. It seems nearly unthinkable that the president of a secular company or college could open an important meeting by praying himself with his own words.

Our Supreme Court has eliminated prayer of all kinds from public school. Politicians no longer personally pray before their speeches, most musicians and entertainers no longer pray before their performances. Yet some popular sports figures regularly pray before and after games. This is not an official part of the program, but it is something that some Christian athletes have decided they will do. The TV cameras focus in on them, and they go on without fear. Their job is strenuous and they know that they need God’s protection.

Will our nation or world begin to follow God as a result of the public prayers of athletes? Probably not. But it has helped many impressionable young people realize that even the strongest and most capable people still need God. Furthermore, these praying athletes are setting an example that most of our other public figures need to follow. Do all of our government leaders, business leaders, entertainers, and other role models need to fearlessly and publicly seek God’s will in what they do? Yes.

Col 3:17 And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

23 Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men,

24 since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.

The Bible has little praise for the person who does nothing with their life in order to avoid doing anything bad. When Christ was on the earth, He healed and spoke to the rich, the poor, and even prostitutes and known sinners. Jesus was not afraid to be among these people because He was firmly committed to God and not about to become like them. He hoped that His teaching and example would rub off on the others.

In some ways, this is the standard for knowing whether one’s participation in athletics is beneficial or not. One cannot continually think of oneself and introduce oneself as “Jane the tennis player” or “Joe the runner”. We are people made in the image of God, and we choose sports as one of our many life activities because we can accomplish things that are pleasing to God. Each person needs to ask:

Am I an athlete who also believes in God? Or am I a servant of God, who is also an athlete? 

Share Your Shelter

Our Savior never argued or tried to force someone to believe in Him. We should not do that either. But if *Shelter in the Word* has helped you, you can share it with others who might be interested in it or helped by it. One of these methods might work for you.

1. Talk to them about what you have learned and encourage them to study the Bible themselves.
2. Copy your *Shelter* and give it to them (almost any office or copy store will do this for \$1 to \$2).
3. Give them your *Shelter* (we will send you a replacement issue if you write or call).
4. Copy just this page or write down the address or phone so they can request their own subscription.

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