

The Catholic Athlete #7: Me, myself, and I

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This series of short reflections addresses athletes who profess the Christian faith, in an attempt to bring together sports and Christianity. I write as a Catholic, hence the title of the series. I trust, however, that athletes from other denominations may also find spiritual profit in these texts.

Teamwork. Athletes may have a better understanding of the idea of teamwork, but they are not immune to the world, the flesh, and the devil. Society is more and more individualistic (please pardon the apparent oxymoron) and we are all under great pressure to be selfish: we feel that if we don't look out for our interests, nobody else will. Marketing is relentlessly tailored to your preferences and mine. Athletes, in particular, are in a constant struggle to balance teamwork and altruism on one hand, with self-care and stewardship of their athletic careers on the other. In this brief article, I would like to tip the scale away from individualism.

In baseball and softball, there is the sacrifice bunt or sacrifice hit, where the player gives up his or her opportunity to get to first base, run the bases, and maybe even score a run, in order to advance another player and improve the team's chances to score. Back in my days as a volleyball player I was frequently (too frequently, for my taste) asked to jump and fake hitting the ball to distract the defense so another hitter could strike the ball and score. It was like performing multiple assists in basketball without getting any credit.

But I have seen few examples of teamwork as striking as those from professional road cycling. In multistage competitions such as the *Vuelta a España*, the *Giro D'Italia* or the *Tour de France*, teamwork is essential. Take the 2019 *Giro* and team Movistar: Mikel Landa, chosen to be the team leader, had less-than-ideal results in a few early stages. He was still racing for a podium, but his teammate Richard Carapaz turned out to have a chance for first place, transforming the team strategy. Landa was asked to become a pawn (peon) and he helped Carapaz win the *maglia rosa*... himself missing third place by 8 seconds after ninety (yes, 90) hours of grueling cycling!

These examples—and many better ones you may think of—are close to the heart of an athlete. I would like to extend the idea of teamwork to the need to have the right priorities: there will be some occasions when the well-being of a friend or classmate is more important than winning a particular competition. The Catholic athlete must keep an open heart, his or her ear needs to be attentive to the whisper of God for these opportunities.

Athletes are used to giving priority to Sports before social life, rest, study, work, family, and fun, and it is true that unless they do that, it will be very difficult for them to succeed. But there is always the temptation, the trap to focus too much on themselves. Meanwhile, God wants every Christian to keep his/her priorities straight (Aragón-Vargas, 1991). God must be number one:



“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.”

(Deuteronomy 6:4-5).

Furthermore, salvation should take precedence over athletic success:

“(…) train yourself to be godly. 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.”

(1 Tim.4:7b,8.)

References:

Aragón-Vargas, L.F. (1991). *Some Thoughts on Christianity and Sports*. Kérwá Institutional Repository, University of Costa Rica. Available from: <http://hdl.handle.net/10669/416>

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