

Here's the story. I have taught business to university students over several decades at colleges where sports are considered really important and are nationally-governed by the NCAA—that's the National Collegiate Athletic Association. And a good number of student-athletes harbor dreams about "going pro"—actually making a career of playing the sport where they have invested so much time and effort.

And I don't know anybody who doesn't root for those students to prevail! But, inevitably, only a very, very small percent of them do....the statistic I remember the NCAA saying recently is that only 2% go on to play professional sports. And, of course, many of those "careers" only last a few years, and, even then, few of those athletes come close to earning the flashy, huge compensation of a Tom Brady or LeBron James. So, I often tell student-athletes the raw truth—that the chances of them earning a living directly playing sports for a long time are pretty much zero. Perhaps, I say to them, if you want durable or lifetime involvement with sports, you might want to go into coaching or something like that, even if it's simply volunteering.

Of course, the next point that needs making is this: in order to make a decent living that gives opportunity to witness for Christ in the workplace, student-athletes need to prepare to be successful in a field like business or engineering or medicine. And the inevitable comment back is one that they have heard from coaches and parents for a long time, is that competitive sports prepare you for competition in business.

Well, now, not so fast. Yes, indeed, some sports can be very formative for athletes in some really productive ways—discipline, preparation, teamwork, skills development, public performance, humble winning, and gracious losing—to name a few. And a number of athletes carry those learned traits over to their career...with some real fruitfulness! And a hearty bravo to that!

But the reality is, even when you compete at elite levels like college or professional athletics, the difference between that landscape and modern business competitive framework is very pronounced and, frankly, generally speaking, the competition in elite modern business is much more difficult than in elite sports. Here are some examples of important differences as to why that is the case.

Sports teams play only one opponent at a time. Look, every time there's an upcoming game, coaches scout out the strengths and weaknesses of that particular competitor and deploy specific tactics that exploit the specific facts about that opponent. Then, for the next opponent, they can change their prep and tactics. In contrast, businesses can face dozens, hundreds, even thousands of competitors at the same time. That means if a business focuses on just defeating one key competitor on a key marketing element like, say, lowering price by adjusting the quality of the product, then another competitor simply swoops in and can defeat the lower price with a superior product. Similar to serious military engagements, business competition must be prepared to fight and execute on multiple fronts at exactly the same time.

Athletes from many countries around the world who participate in the Olympics every four years all have to follow the same performance-enhancement protocols and rules to ensure fair competition. In contrast, many American businesses have gone out of business because other countries produce the same products at a lower cost. You see, various countries do not follow the same business and legal rules, including patents and other intellectual property laws designed to honor inventors of new processes.

Rules rarely change for sports contests. Enduring sports like soccer or basketball have rules in place that rarely change. This allows coaches to count on those rules to build a strategy. In contrast, what we might label as "rules" for business can change at any time. For example, much to the detriment of Blockbuster, Netflix decided to deliver movies digitally, completely changing the need for the costly management of movie-rental outlets. So, Blockbuster declined from over 9,000 stores to just one, and that's likely open just for nostalgia's sake. Why the closures? Because Netflix didn't have to follow some rule that movies could only be delivered in either expensive movie theaters or in cartridges rented from retail locations.

Professional sports teams in America often enjoy salary caps. Due to the way some sports are structured in America, teams have formed leagues and can artificially keep costs down by establishing some limitations of salary structures for the best athletes in the nation. So sports teams' competitors in American football know that their competitors are limited in what they can pay the best quarterback. Salary caps level the financial playing field by limiting expenses and work to minimize the poaching of the best players by wealthy teams. In contrast, businesses have no such salary caps. If you want to keep your world-class CEO in your business, you will have to structure a compensation package that works to defeat what your competitors may pay to woo your executive away. So, you see, professional sports teams rarely go out of business...while businesses do.

Professional sports can ban any technical or technological changes that bring advantage to the inventor. Suppose that an NBA team creates a new basketball that is easier to use and fosters higher points scored by the team, and it patents the ball to only be used by them while they are on offense. But you know something like that is simply not allowed. In contrast, if a business can ingeniously increase its productivity by inventing and possibly patenting a new process for its workers and customers to enjoy, then that is fair game...in a wise country, there are few rules against business innovation that benefits consumers.

There's definitely more along these lines, of course, but the practice of business in the digital era and international era is harsh...harsh, that is, *for businesses and their leaders and people who don't want to face the prospect of competition!* On the other hand, it's wonderful for general prosperity worldwide, for consumers who want people like Bill Gates and Jeff Bezos working diligently on their behalf, and for people who want to obtain strong skill sets and work hard. Those types of competitive free markets have fostered the last several decades of enormous prosperity. But it doesn't work as well for people who feel entitled to easy paths.

Professional sports do erect certain barriers, certain rules, and certain salary cap arrangements for the benefit of some and to the detriment of others. So, sports competition, as strong as it may be and often is, well, it falls short of the robust competition in the business world that has resulted in the massive betterment we see in many countries. The fact is, with the robust physical infrastructure and digital infrastructure now in place around much of the world, geographical barriers have lost some of their dramatic blocking impact for general prosperity. Now the barriers that really stymie the prosperity of people worldwide are those governments that paternalistically prohibit their own citizens to—of their own free will—do basic trade with others around the world!

So, just how does the Kingdom fit in to all this competition-talk? Well, Jesus and His unique sacrifice on the Cross competes daily with every secular philosophy, every religion, every whimsical theory about life—each and every day. The competition is fierce, playing out supernaturally every day with the aid of effective witness. But you know “Christ and Him crucified” is differentiated from every other service offering: the remission of sins, eternal life and fellowship with God—all through the amazing gift of grace.

That brings us to the finished work of the Cross. Jesus has won the war already, providing a wonderful eternal destiny for each person who would respond to His gift of grace. But He then allows us to participate in spiritual battles in our generation...the proclaiming of the Gospel...the disciplining of believers. Within the assurance of Jesus's overall victory on the Cross, we are engaged in spiritual battles as part of God's Kingdom. And those battles are not about flesh and blood, they are serious spiritual struggles.

We know competition in sports is different than business. And the Kingdom is different than both. But no matter the realms we operate in, we must teach young people to understand the nature of the competition and the differing roads to victory in each realm. Strong discernment must inform our competitive juices. Are we effectively discerning these differences and teaching the next generation well?

A&A: Application & Action

1. Many Americans love sports. But sports are not the fullest expression of the obstacles we face in life. How do you specifically train young people in your midst to understand the nature and scope of competition in the various realms of life? Elaborate.
2. In your roles in your workplace, family, and church, what do you do to ensure that those you influence don't fall into a destructive entitlement mentality? Be specific.
3. Your spiritual life is found on Christ's victorious finished work on the Cross. What does that victory look like to others who observe your faith journey? Be specific.