

THE BIBLE FOR **ATHLETES** IN THE THICK OF **COMPETITION**

LET'S START HERE: I WON'T BE CALLING ANYBODY OUT.

Still, in my attention to professional golf events and interaction with Christian golf fans, I often hear expressions of excitement over tournament winners who “speak up for Jesus” by quoting verses they have used to push them to victory. And I’m afraid it is all I can do not to write back to these elated fans and ask, “You do realize that the passage they’re quoting is being entirely misconstrued?”

To their credit, most Christian athletes will be the first to tell you that they are



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not theologians—and honestly, it shows in the Scripture passages they regularly choose. So as tempting as it is to capture your attention by giving some specific examples of athletes' victory speeches and the Scripture they have commandeered as a catchphrase for their winning day, I'll keep the names quiet for the sake of the humble and the innocent.

Yet I think it is important to consider some commonly chosen Bible passages and assess their application before selecting other Scripture choices that may make a lot more sense during a game. Here we go.



Three passages that athletes should trade out for something better

Theologians call the convenient application of a Scripture passage to our personal circumstances or interests “prooftexting.” Some teachers may do this deceptively, but most believers do it lazily or accidentally. Understanding the context of a passage helps us keep a check on our prooftexting and challenges us to apply the verse to our lives as it was meant to be applied, not how we would *like* it to be applied. Desiring to be more careful with our Scripture application, then, let's look at three passages that may need to be phased out of use by Christian athletes.

- Jeremiah 29:11 - *“For I know the plans I have for you,” says the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future.”*

This is a powerful promise found in the prophetic passages of Scripture. What athletes—and frankly, business people, artists, moms, and just about anyone hoping for a happy outcome—fail to recognize here is that this prophecy was given to a specific people: ancient Israel. Moreover, it is surrounded by all kinds of warnings about what

will happen to God's people if they neglect the pursuit of him. Sadly, verses like this have made their way to the front of many Christians' “promise packs” because they have the ring of comfort and success. We do a much better job of biblical application if we are sure that a promise is really meant for us and if we understand that God's picture of success is infrequently the world's picture of success.

- Philippians 4:13 – *I can do all things through him who gives me strength.*

No doubt, athletes need strength. And no doubt, one of the chief principles of sport psychology is to keep telling yourself you can do it. So what better combination for a believer than to say that God can give me the strength to accomplish my goals? The trouble is that no theologian would agree here that “all things” means *all* things. For instance, we wouldn't say that through God we can do things outside of his will for us. We can also find plenty of athletes who have believed this verse in full faith but have never accomplished their highest athletic goals. Plus, there are plenty of athletes who win—maybe even dominate their sport—but are doing so without any attentiveness to God. This is a powerful verse, but it is better left in the context where it is written: the ability to respond with Christlike character to the many vagaries of life, whether winning or losing.

- Philippians 3:13-14 - *But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.*

I'm sure you get the idea here: reaching the goal. This is what every athlete sets out to do, even the weekend cyclist preparing for her inaugural century ride. So “pressing on” toward such a goal is a perfect fit for the professional and the

weekend warrior alike. But it has nothing to do with what the apostle Paul was writing about. Paul was talking about the goal of an eternal prize—a pursuit that ends in death, often a martyr’s death in Paul’s time. Yes, there are professional athletes whose priorities are in order and who, in addition to attempting to be world-class competitors, are willing to put their lives on the line for Jesus. They are pressing on for a heavenly prize. Good! But that pursuit and the pursuit of a trophy that will fade are not the same thing, as Paul clearly delineated for his readers in 1 Corinthians 9:25.



Five passages that may be just right for competition

As a writer, coach and athlete who wants to do things according to God’s design, I wrestle with the difficult balance between maintaining a competitive edge and demonstrating Jesus’ heart. A young athlete recently told me that he had a teammate walk out on him because this athlete did not cuss and berate himself when he made errors. The absence of such behavior, the teammate thought, showed that the athlete did not care about performing well. No wonder it is hard to be a Christian athlete!

I know as an athlete, however, just how much I care. My competitive drive needs no STP®. Put me on the field of play and I am instantly revved up. I’ll guess it’s the same for you. You hate to lose. But you hate it even more when you deny God’s presence in your life by the things you say or do in the midst of competition. For a committed Christian athlete, this isn’t just about sportsmanship; it’s about reflecting the Lord of our lives. And when we don’t do that well, we fail—no matter how many trophies adorn our shelves.

What I have grown interested in, then, are passages of Scripture that feed an athlete’s char-

acter more than his or her drive. There are many of these, certainly. And after reading this article, I hope you will be better equipped to find them yourself. But let me introduce you to five passages that you would do well to have fixed in your mind. In some fast-action sports, like volleyball or tennis, you won’t find much time to reflect on these passages in the middle of a game—but if you go into a game with them stored in your heart, you place yourself in a great position to have Jesus’ aroma overcome the sweat of your athletic effort.

- Matthew 5:16 - *“Let your light shine before others that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.”*

This is an excellent starting point for all Christian athletes, for it emphasizes the end goal in the way we live our lives: God’s glory. Certainly it is not our victories that will cause others to glorify God—especially when those “others” are our opponents. Rather, when we conduct ourselves with Christ’s heart inside our own, God’s light will become our own and he will be seen as the source of our character.

- Colossians 3:2 - *Set your mind on things above, not on earthly things.*

Dedicated athletes are very good at establishing priorities and sticking to them. But for Christian athletes, the pursuit of eternal goals must win out. If the competition becomes the most important thing—even in the thick of it—we have lost eternal perspective; we have chosen to go after treasures that moth and rust destroy while forsaking the things that last. The context of this verse directly attaches the setting of our mind to the wonder of Christ’s resurrection and glory. Why would we ever want to be overcome by lesser thoughts?

- Colossians 3:12-15 - *Therefore, as God’s chosen*

people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful.

While the context of this passage emphasizes relationships among believers, we know that the world takes notice of how we act to one another (see John 13:35). Besides, you will need a lot of these aspects of character with your teammates as much as you will need them with your opponents! This is a big passage, one to learn over time, perhaps, but you might start with key phrases, such as this one: "...let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts."

- Galatians 5:22-23 - *The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Against such things there is no law.*

I recently spent the day in the close presence of an athlete whose character was not governed by many of these traits. When adversity came, his words and demeanor demonstrated a lack of peace, patience and self-control. But here's the funny thing: he met his goal for that day, qualifying for a national competition. Sadly, the only lesson I got from him was this: don't get upset before the day is over. His attitude coupled with his successful result made him look more like a fool than a winner. To store this list of Spirit-driven characteristics in our heart should interrupt us in the heat of competition from dishonoring our God, our teammates, our opponents, and ourselves.

- Isaiah 40:30-31 – *Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings*

like eagles, they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.

At first glance, this may appear to be one of those verses conveniently applied to an athletic context: getting back our physical strength. But consider this passage anew. If in the midst of competition, we can take a deep breath and say, "Lord, I place my hope in you to restore my commitment to Jesus' character in this moment," we will be well on our way to giving him glory. We will be able to count on him to renew our spiritual strength—the strength we need to be like Jesus in the thick of competition.



One great verse for reflection after the competition ends

We put ourselves in excellent position to honor God in competition when we fix certain Bible passages in our hearts and minds. But before we come to an end, we want to recognize that proper reflection after the game is over can also help us in our growing relationship with God and others. Here is a passage many people, including athletes, know already, and one that can help us in our warm-down, whether we have won or lost.

- Romans 8:28 - *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*

Athletes are prone to two extremes: overwhelming pride and self-absorbed disappointment. Both of these responses to competition can lead to faithlessness. When we stop after a match or meet and think back on what has transpired while also recognizing that God will be using this hour in our life for a greater good, we are humbly giving him credit for his preeminence over all matters.

The apostle Paul told the ancient Athenians

that God appointed the times and places each person would live. This is an overwhelming truth, for we recognize in God's detail that he must also have a reason for our existence at each and every moment! One of the best routines we can develop as athletes, then, is to keep asking ourselves, before and after both practices and games, "What

purpose does God have for me in this?" If we can reach that answer through prayerful conversation with him and shared counsel with other believers, we can match our purpose to his. I can think of no greater victory than that—for then we will find ourselves right in the middle of God's will for our lives.



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