

“A spectacularly well-rounded book on faith and sports: grounded in creation, centered on the gospel, and aimed at practical discipleship. Daniels and Reid have written a thoughtful and accessible book that will inspire many to play for the glory of God. I highly commend it to athletes, coaches, fans, or anyone interested in the intersection of faith and sports.”

JEREMY TREAT, Pastor for Preaching and Vision, Reality Church LA; Professor of Theology, Biola University; Fellow, The Keller Center for Cultural Apologetics

“Daniels and Reid masterfully address the complex intersection of faith and sports, offering practical wisdom for athletes, coaches, and sports professionals seeking to honor God in their competitive pursuits. As someone deeply involved in preparing the next generation of sports business professionals, I find this book to be an invaluable resource. It’s essential reading for anyone wanting to compete with both excellence and godliness in today’s sports landscape.”

DR DARIN W. WHITE, Samford University / Brock School of Business; Margaret Gage Bush Distinguished Professor; Executive Director, Sports Industry Program

“A must-read for any Christian athlete. Graham and Jonny do a great job of encouraging us back to a foundation of knowing the treasure of Christ and who we are in him. May this bring you restored freedom to play your sport to the best of the abilities God has given you—for his glory and your delight.”

DEBBIE FLOOD, Two-Time Olympic Silver Medalist, Quadruple Sculls Rowing, 2004 and 2008

“Sports are an amazing gift from God, but, just like any good gift, they can become an idol in the hearts of sinners. Graham and Jonny do an excellent job of praising the gift while encouraging the reader to do some deep heart-searching. Any athlete, parent, or coach would do well to read this.”

JOHN PERRITT, Author, *Time Out! The Gift or God of Youth Sports*; Director of Resources, Reformed Youth Ministries

“This book reinforces my love for God and the ultimate purpose he has for me through my sport. It takes the complexity of it all and formulates it in a way that is relatable to everyone, using the testimonies of successful sporting figures. No matter what stage you are at as a believer or an athlete, this book will give you a deeper understanding of how your faith and sport can be combined to serve God. I highly recommend it!”

KIRANI JAMES, Olympic Gold Medalist, Men’s 400m, 2012; Men’s 400m World Champion, 2011

“Engaging, enjoyable, perceptive, and full of biblical wisdom and practical relevance. Every sports-loving Christian should read this.”

JAMES ROBSON, Principal, Oak Hill Theological College, London

“Graham is someone I trust and someone who has had a great impact on my life and the lives of many others. I’ve spoken to him on many occasions when I’ve had to make difficult decisions in my career. He makes time for people, and I think that’s because of his faith.”

DAVID MOYES, Former EPL Manchester United and West Ham Manager

“This outstanding book accomplishes what so few Christian books do: it is theologically rich, culturally insightful, accessible, well-applied, and heartwarming throughout. Whether you are an elite athlete, a parent of a child who is passionate about sport, a coach, a club player, or a fan, you will find so much to benefit you here.”

PETE NICHOLAS, Senior Pastor, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, Downtown, New York

“This book puts you in the mind and heart of the athlete. I would highly recommend this book to those looking for encouragement along their athletic journey, those looking to find the words to encourage a friend or training partner, and those wanting to connect their faith to their sports.”

CHRISTIAN TAYLOR, Two-Time Olympic Gold Medalist, Men’s Triple Jump, 2012 and 2016; Four-time Triple Jump World Champion

“Sports dominate our cultural landscape. It’s a gift, not a god. *Spiritual Game Plan* is a great little book for those who love sports and love Jesus, and want to relate these two loves in an ordered rather than disordered way. Recommended.”

DAN STRANGE, Director, Crosslands Forum; Author, *Plugged In* and *Making Faith Magnetic*

“Over the last 40 years, no one I know has given more thought to the relationship between Christianity and sports than Graham Daniels. This gem of a book will help you think rightly in order to play, watch, and enjoy the God-given gift of sports for his glory.”

GAVIN PEACOCK, Former EPL Chelsea and Newcastle Midfielder; Author, *A Greater Glory: From Pitch to Pulpit*

“Love sports? This wonderful book can help you enjoy them more as you frame being an athlete in God’s big plan for you and the world.”

PAUL REES, Lead Pastor, Charlotte Chapel,
Edinburgh, Scotland

“I love this book. Graham and Jonny have filled it with Scripture and insights from Christian athletes and their stories; with sound theology and wise practice; with Christ-centered perspective and plain guidance for players, fans, coaches, and parents. And all this under the banner of God’s glory through Christian joy and our joy to his glory. I only wish we had had this book sooner. In our sports-obsessed society, this will help Christians of all ages, all sorts, and all sports.”

DAVID MATHIS, Senior Teacher, desiringGod.org;
Pastor, Cities Church, Saint Paul, MN;
Author, *A Little Theology of Exercise*

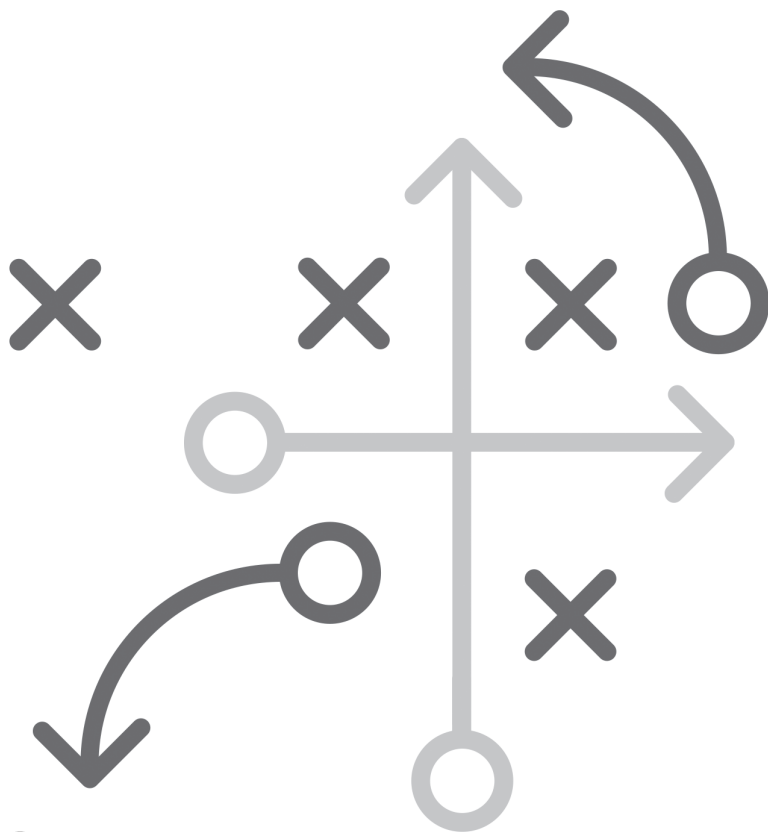
“This book covers so many poignant topics related to winning and losing and how we see ourselves when we’re immersed in the sporting world. It shows us that we are more than our achievements and that it’s possible to be successful without a medal. Chapter 4 was particularly resounding for me.”

NATHAN JONES, Former EPL Southampton Manager;
Charlton Athletic Manager

Spiritual Game Plan

Graham Daniels
& Jonny Reid

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**Competing
with Joy
and Godliness**

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Introduction

|(Graham) was a professional soccer player when I became a Christian in 1984. (This happened to be the year my team set the all-time record for most successive games without a win, but that's beside the point.) I went to meet my new church leaders to discuss baptism. The conversation went well—until one of them questioned whether it was appropriate for a Christian to work in the highly competitive and commercial world of professional soccer.

It was a good question.

Before I'd formulated a response, one of the other leaders pointed out that being a professional athlete brought many evangelistic opportunities. He accepted that elite sports had several negative aspects but said that the platform provided by being a soccer player potentially countered them, because I could use my (small amount of) fame and status for public evangelism.

The suggestion that the merits of evangelism trumped the defective aspects of professional soccer won the day. The meeting with my church leaders

ended well, and the request for baptism was granted. Soon enough I did have opportunities to speak about Jesus at several events, both as the “celebrity” testimony and alongside far more successful athletes. It appeared that you could be a Christian in sports as long as you realized that the point of sports was as a useful platform to evangelize people.

I (Jonny) was not yet born in 1984, and I have never come near to professional level in any sport! But I did grow up sports-obsessed. As soon as I could walk, I had a stick and a ball in my hand. From hockey to cricket to golf, anything that involved a bat and a ball would occupy me for hours (and in the case of cricket, days!). I played competitive sports throughout school. I put my trust in Jesus in my teenage years, and from then on, the two dominant aspects of my life were my faith and my sports. But the two never mixed. It wasn’t until I was 17, having played competitive sports for nearly ten years, that I was first challenged by the idea that maybe God had something to say about sports and how I competed.

We are guessing you picked up this book because you love sports (or someone in your family does) and because you also love Jesus. So which of the three approaches we’ve outlined here do you find yourself most naturally aligning with?

1. Deep down you think sports are probably a waste of time and that proper Christians should spend time doing proper Christian things. Sports are not one of those things, and so you feel a bit guilty about loving them.

2. Sports are a useful vehicle for evangelism. They give a platform for the gospel, and so it's okay to play if you use it to share the gospel.
3. Sports are great, obviously! And you've never really thought about if and how they connect with your faith.

In our experience most Christians take one of these three approaches unless they steer clear of sports altogether (which neither of us can quite imagine doing, but God did make everyone different!). In this book we want to offer you a fourth way of thinking about sports. It's one which starts with God and asks why God would ordain the creation of this thing we call sports. It's a way which shows how sports are a wonderful gift that God can use to play a key role in our growth and maturity as Christians. As we look at the Bible, we'll see a more liberating approach than feeling a bit guilty, a deeper approach than only seeing sports as an evangelistic opportunity, and a better approach than not linking our faith and our sports at all.

To do that we're going to spend six chapters looking at what God's word says about sports and how the gospel transforms our thinking about and participation within it. Having established these core principles, the last four chapters of the book will apply them to various different ways of being involved in sports besides simply playing. So please read all of the first six chapters, and then pick and choose the ones at the end that apply to your particular circumstances.

It's fair to say we both *love* sports. Our prayer is that this book will enhance your love for sports too—but also, and more importantly, exponentially increase your love for God.

And in case you're wondering, I (Graham) am no longer the not so proud owner of the record for the longest streak without winning. I'm grateful to the efforts of Derby County of the English Premier League in 2007-2008 for removing that particular accolade from me...

Chapter 1

Why God Made Sports

Sports, at their best, are a source of great joy—and there’s a reason for that. In the film *Chariots of Fire*, the 1924 Olympian Eric Liddell says:

*“I believe God made me for a purpose, but he also made me fast, and when I run, I feel his pleasure.”**

These words reveal why God made a world that includes sports, why so many of us are wired to love them, and why the Bible has much to say about them.

The world of the Bible was an ancient one, but it was also an active one. The apostle Paul, for instance, was clearly familiar with sports and regularly chose to use athletic metaphors for living the Christian life: a race (1 Corinthians 9:24), a fight (1 Timothy 6:12), training (2 Timothy 3:16) and so on.

* While he says this in the film, it’s not clear if Liddell actually said this in real life. But it captures well his approach to his running.

But to understand what the Bible says about sports, we need to go a bit deeper (and a lot earlier) than the New Testament's use of athletic language. We need to go back to the beginning, to creation. It will seem as if we've stepped away from sports (having only just begun), but as we explore four aspects of God's design and desire for humanity, we'll see how they connect to our sporting life—and how each both explains our love for and increases our joy in sports.

Creativity: God Is Creative, and Sports Reflects This

The very first line of the Bible tells us:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. (Genesis 1:1)

Now, just in case you have swept over this familiar sentence without finding it awesome, we are going to stop and see if we can make your jaw drop. Let's consider a slightly later part in the creation story:

God made two great lights—the greater light to govern the day and the lesser light to govern the night. He also made the stars. (Genesis 1:16-17)

Check out those final five words: “He also made the stars.” It reads like a throwaway line. Yet scientists estimate there are 200 billion galaxies in the observable universe. To the Creator God, such an awesome act is so easy that it is almost captured as a footnote.

Now look outside the window (or go and find one if you're reading in a windowless room) and look at the

different things you can see. If you can see a tree, then it is one of over 73,000 different species, and trees are one group within the 380,000 or so species of plant that God chose to create. Each was intricately designed by the same God who made the stars. God is innately and wonderfully creative, and designed a vast, ordered and perfect world.

However, in a sense, God left some work to be done on his behalf. As the Bible teacher and author Nancy Guthrie says, “Eden was unspoiled but also unfinished.”¹ This is where the story of human creativity begins:

Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” (Genesis 1:26-27)

Humans are God’s “image.” To understand what this means, it is helpful to know that the book of Genesis, like the rest of the Old Testament, was mostly written in Hebrew. The Hebrew word translated as “image” can also be translated as “idol” or “statue”—the word means a visible representation of an invisible being. Therefore, while many religions place statues of gods in temples so that worshipers can “see” their god, Genesis makes it plain that humans don’t need to build stone images because we are made as God’s living images. “As a mirror reflects, so a man should reflect God ... in man God is to become visible on earth.”²

One implication of being God’s image on earth is

captured in God's job description for humanity in Genesis 2:15:

The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.

Once again, to grasp the wonder of what God is doing, we need to unpack the sentence. The original Hebrew word translated here as “work” can also be translated as “service,” and it is also often rendered as “worship” in the Old Testament (for instance Exodus 3:12; 8:1; 2 Samuel 15:8; Psalm 102:22).

The relationship between these three words is very important. Work, service and worship are not separate things. We are used to separating at least two of these ideas—“work” and “worship.” We typically view “work” as doing your job to earn a living and “worship” as what happens in church buildings.

Genesis does not do this. All kinds of creative enterprises—what we would tend to call activities of “work” or even “leisure”—contribute to the worship of God in the fulfillment of his plan to develop his world. Tim Keller defines “work” as...

“... rearranging the raw material of God's creation in such a way that it helps the world in general, and people in particular, thrive and flourish.”³

The “creation mandate”—to rule the world under God by working and taking care of it—implies that every creative activity is an opportunity to work in the service of God and is (or should be), therefore, an act of worship. The worship of God is to be found in every

aspect of human creativity, including entrepreneurship, engineering, business, the arts, music... and sports.

Sports are full of creation. We're creative in sports when we invent a new shot (like the step-back three-pointer in basketball), when we work out the best way to get the better of our opponent during a game, or even when someone creates a new chant in the stands. God created people with athletic ability to use their sporting talents to work, serve and worship him.

And there's more. God's plan, captured in that job description, was for humanity to riff on God's initial design and extend it. The first man and woman were to extend the Eden that God had made. Whenever we create within God's creation, we are reflecting this God-given role. Sports are an outworking of this; over the centuries, humans have developed numerous sports by taking games and formalizing the rules and rankings. Today, there are millions of people playing hundreds of sports across the globe. To take one example, a Christian, James Naismith, while he was studying at the YMCA's International Training School, wanted to create a game that would connect sports and faith by promoting character traits like teamwork and creativity while minimizing the use of physical violence that was found in other sports. The result was basketball.

The invention of any sport, with the imagination required to take an initial kernel of an idea and bring it to an ordered and bounded form for mass participation, is itself reflecting the kind of world that God created.

Sports bring out our God-given creativity. Designing or playing is an opportunity to develop God's good creation and fulfill our job description to work, serve and worship God in the world he has made.

Community: God Has Always Been in Community, and Sports Are About Relationships

In the creation story, God says:

Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness.

(Genesis 1:26)

God speaks about himself as “us”—as plural rather than singular. As the Bible unfolds, it becomes clear that this is because God has never been on his own, but has always been three-in-one. “You loved me before the creation of the world” (John 17:24) is how Jesus, God the Son, describes his eternal relationship with God the Father. This is why we can say that “God is love” and that God was love before there was any human to love. This love from eternity flows down to, and should flow out from, us:

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. (1 John 4:7-8)

God's design for humanity is to build loving community that reflects his own nature. That's why God says:

It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him. (Genesis 2:18)

From the beginning, the mandate to develop God's world involved men and women teaming up to look after his creation. This teamwork is seen at its most basic level in the way new humans are made.

It is deeply human to have relationships—to give and receive love. We need friends, and we need family. We all know this. Of course, being alone is fine, and it sometimes keeps us sane! But to be lonely is terribly distressing, and to feel always alone is even worse.

At its best, sports are deeply communal. Think about the bonds sports create—the exhilaration of a great moment in a team sport when you get to be one individual contributing to a shared victory, or in an individual sport when you win a race and your coach is there to see it, or a time when you look into the crowd or around at the finish line and see someone who loves you, cheering you in.

Sports, even when they are most individualistic, are always a team affair.

Michael Jordan, while involved in a team sport, transcended his team and his sport. Yet, despite his own unrivaled talent, he recognized that he couldn't play without his team, especially his great friend Scottie Pippen:

*"I didn't win without Scottie Pippen, and that's why I consider him my best teammate of all time. He helped me so much in the way I approached the game, in the way I played the game. Whenever they speak Michael Jordan, they should speak Scottie Pippen."*⁴