

Competition:

Still the “Number One” Concern?

BY RON DU PREEZ

Introduction

When I entered the 9th grade at a Seventh-day Adventist academy, I applied myself diligently to my studies. At the end of the first term, I had earned straight A's and was at the top of my class. But when I compared my grades with those of my classmates, I discovered that the next highest grade point average was a “C.” Since I was only interested in being “number one” in class, I decided that I really did not have to study *that* hard. Consequently, there was a steady and marked decline in my grades, even though I still managed to retain first place. Unfortunately, I ended up “proud of my mediocrity”!

How could this have occurred in a school whose goal was to teach Christian virtues and values? I had faithfully attended Bible classes, where we studied about the *sacrificial* life of Jesus Christ—how He had consistently lived to uplift others and not Himself. I even attended chapels and worship, which stressed the importance of being a *humble* Christian. Why, then, had I become so *self*-concerned? What had “gone wrong” in my educational experience?

For more than a century, concerned Adventist educators have contemplated the contentious issue of competition. Although ath-

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letic activities have often been the focus of this furor, reflective educators have rightly recognized that rivalry can arise virtually anywhere. Since we believe that in addition to imparting information, the Christian teacher must also seek to develop godly character in students, the question naturally arises: What can an Adventist campus do to inculcate a Christ-centered spirit of self-sacrificial service through all of its activities?

In considering that question, this article will examine two issues. First, we will look at the apparently innocuous issue of record-keeping and reporting, together with some alternatives. Then we will examine selected aspects of athletic activities, along with specific proposals for transforming competitive events into cooperative ones. While not claiming that this discussion is either exhaustive or the final word on this matter, I do hope to stimulate serious reflection on ways Adventist educators can provide a more wholistic and balanced approach to the controversial question of competition.

Reporting: Risks and Recommendations

Even a cursory reading of the Bible indicates that on various occasions, records were kept regarding the growth and development

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of God's people.¹ Unquestionably, record-keeping is useful and frequently necessary in order to measure improvement and progress. This is clear from statements about figures such as the 3,000 baptized as a result of Peter's preaching on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:40). Furthermore, there is nothing inherently evil in setting targets or goals. However, this all too frequently includes a dangerous downside—pride in personal achievement.² This is quintessentially epitomized in Nebuchadnezzar's braggadocio: "Is not this great Babylon that I have built for a royal dwelling by my mighty power and for the honor of *my* majesty?" (Daniel 4:30).³ The result? With the swiftness of an eagle, he was reduced from a boast to a beast!

One of the more subtle dangers in focusing on figures is that those of us who work for the Lord will take credit for providential blessings and divinely bestowed successes. I'll never forget the "global evangelist" I met at an international airport one day. After a brief chat, we exchanged business cards. Other than personal data, which I have omitted or changed to conceal his identity, his card reads as follows:

John Doe, an apostle to the nations, has preached in more than 55 nations, to tens of thousands of people around the world. He often preaches at the *largest churches* in nations. He spends 7 hours a day with God . . . 4 hours a day in prayer and 3 hours a day in the Word of God. In 1999 he preached in 40 nations, all in *one year*, and might be the *first man* in the history of Christianity to preach in 40 nations in *one year*. In 1999 he preached in *every nation* in Central and South America, all in *one year*, and

might be the *first man* in our time to have done that. (Italics supplied.)

All that, and more personal data, on his regular-size small-print business card! Admittedly, this is an extreme example, but the danger must be recognized for what it really is—the perils of *pride in personal performance*, the risk of self-glorification!

Thus, while acknowledging that there is a place for financial figures, quantitative analyses, and numerical records, do we really need to elevate statistical reports to the "number one" position, as is so often done? The *number* of new students enrolled; the *number* of courses being offered; the *number* of books in the library; the *number* of faculty members with doctorates; the *number* of computers in the lab; the *number* of graduates; even the *number* of baptisms! This fixation on figures conveys the impression that quantity is of great consequence, while at the same time ignoring qualitative development. It might be helpful to remember at this point that only eight persons were saved in the ark,⁴ and that Jesus Himself warned: "Wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are *many* who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are *few* who find it" (Matthew 7:13b, 14). Note that it is only the *few* who find salvation!

Since a wholistic education seeks to promote Christian values such as quality, commitment, mastery and excellence in all things, altruistic self-sacrificial service, and Christ-centered humility,

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wouldn't it be more in keeping with these objectives to reassess the entire concept of "success," then report progress in a way that promotes a faith-based perspective?

Instead of a Dean's List (which emphasizes academic achievement), why not establish a "President's List," which seeks to recognize *all* students who model a consistent, harmonious development of the basic values and objectives of the institution? Quality growth can also be assessed by means of pre- and post-tests, improved community relations, the overall tone and general content of student publications, the growth and success of the work program, improved methods and results in student retention, the vibrancy and spontaneity of voluntary spiritual activities initiated and conducted by students,⁵ the growth of spiritual mentoring programs, the improved health awareness and wellness practices of students and employees, the number of students and employees involved in optional community and church-related activities, the quality and relevance of scholarly faculty publications, the institutional loyalty of administrators, faculty members, staff, and students, and even alumni, the exit reflections of students regarding the perceived quality and value of their educational experience (especially extra-curricular practices), and the selection of "Alumni of the Year"⁶ who live exemplary lives that are "Bible-based, Christ-centered, service-oriented, and kingdom-directed."⁷

In brief, the focus should not be on facts and figures, but rather on developing dedicated students who seek to be faithful to the Lord as they serve the church, the community, and the world as a whole.

Sports: Self-Centeredness and Solutions

Without a doubt, the issue of sports and games⁸ has been one of the most contentious in Adventist educational circles. This has primarily been due to concerns over rivalry and competition.⁹

But first, a necessary clarification:

1. When discussing competitive activities, some have sought to differentiate between "rivalry" and "competition," seeing the former as problematic, but the latter as acceptable. However, since various English dictionaries use the terms as synonyms, we will also use them interchangeably in this article.¹⁰

2. Not everything in life is competitive. Some activities are innately competitive—sports such as tennis, baseball, or soccer, in which the only way that one person can win is if the other loses. However, other aspects of life such as work, hobbies, or nature activities are not inherently rivalrous. They become so only when people *make* them competitive.¹¹

Thus, while a spirit of rivalry can arise in many situations, including physical education and other classes, the main emphasis of this article will be extra-curricular sports because these involve

competitive activities sponsored by our schools, often with little thought about the values being transmitted, which "can be damaging to the spiritual growth of the youth of the church."¹²

This mixed message concerning competition is clearly a problem that we need to face head-on. Back in 1980, Reuben Hilde commented on this "double standard" by using the metaphor of the Adventist Church marching around a modern Jericho, an enemy to be conquered, before entering the promised land:

"We've tramped with uneven cadence; we've blown our trumpets—but with different sounds and different pitches; we've marched to the beat of a variety of drummers; and we've stubbed our toes on the rock pile of competitive grades. . . . We've given prizes to our temperance winners, but we've cried aloud and spared not (and we've given it that certain ring) when the kids have become too enthusiastic over a basketball game. . . . [And] we've used red books [of Ellen G. White] to spank the child afflicted with the inordinate craze for competition. . . . In plain English, we have been inconsistent."¹³

Addressing the issue of rivalry, Paul says that those who engage in "measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise." Furthermore, the Christian is challenged to "Carry each other's burdens, . . . without comparing himself to somebody else"; and to "do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves."¹⁴ Put plainly, "Competition is *selfish*. . . . It tends to breed suspicion, alienation, and exploitation."¹⁵ Or, as George Knight points out: "At its base, competition rests on strife for the supremacy—to be the *first*, the best, the most, and so on. Here, we should note, is the very disease that stands at the *heart of sin*."¹⁶

Ellen White wrote that "a spirit of competition . . . is all wrong and displeasing to God,"¹⁷ and that rivalry "is an offence to God."¹⁸ In her classic on the principles of true education, she spoke pointedly about competitive sports:

"Some of the most popular amusements, such as [American]¹⁹ football and boxing, have become schools of brutality. They are developing the same characteristics as did the games of ancient Rome. The love of *domination*, the *pride* in mere *brute force*, the *reckless disregard of life*, are exerting upon the youth a power to *demoralize* that is appalling.

"Other athletic games, though not so brutalizing, are scarcely less objectionable. . . . they stimulate the *love of pleasure* and excitement, thus fostering a *distaste for useful labor*, a disposition to shun practical duties and responsibilities. . . . *Thus the door is opened to dissipation and lawlessness, with their terrible results.*"²⁰

Basic Problems

Essentially, competitive sports "is a gladiatorial model, inherently *antibiblical* and *anti-Christian*, for it idealizes an adversarial view of, and relationship to, other human beings—God's children."²¹ Indeed, "Self-promotion is the lifeblood of competitive games."²² There are seven basic problems with these activities—They

1. *Promote vengeance*: They foster a selfish, "pay-back" attitude;

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2. *Glorify violence*: They encourage aggression and a “killer instinct”;²³
3. *Normalize overreaction*: They portray uncontrolled reactions as normal;
4. *Displace perception of spiritual need*: An empty soul finds a pseudo-fulfillment in sports;²⁴
5. *Promote adoration of victors*: Sports stars achieve a godlike status, and hero-worship abounds;
6. *Foster pride*: The “successful” easily become self-centered and proud;
7. *Replace positive values*: Biblical norms, such as love and truthfulness, are ignored, while hatred and deception are promoted as positive virtues.²⁵

Biblical Values

If Christian educators are to develop biblical values in every aspect of campus life, especially in sports and games, they must conduct all of these activities in such a manner as to be:

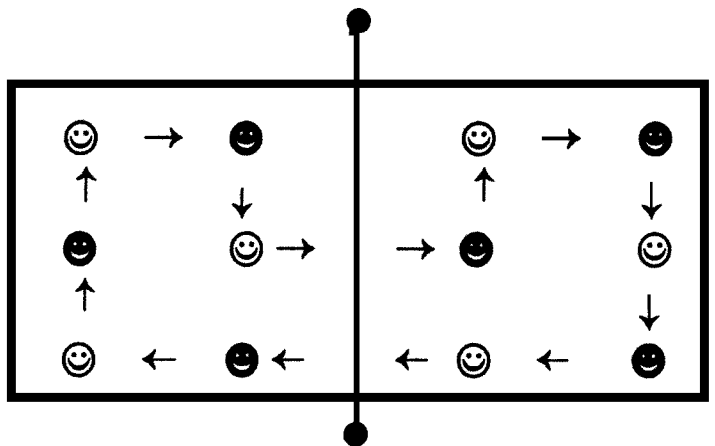
- *Christ-centered*: The self-sacrificial, humble spirit of Jesus is the model;
- *Character-building*: Virtues like kindness and honesty are fostered;
- *Cooperative*: A community orientation is promoted through teamwork;
- *Compassionate*: Love and mercy are fostered;
- *Controlled*: Emotional control and self-discipline are encouraged;

- *Complementary*: Recreation is treated as only one part of a balanced lifestyle;
- *Confessional*: Every sport/game provides opportunities for participants (and even spectators) to focus on God and His goodness.

To implement these essential principles, teachers will need to creatively alter one or more of the basic rules of every sports activity. For example, the competitive aspect of basketball can be effectively neutralized by simply swapping one or two players from one team to the other at the end of each of the first three quarters. Thus everyone gets to play on both “sides” throughout the game, yet the group actually constitutes one “team.”

In volleyball, after winning a volley served by their rivals, team members normally rotate on their side of

the court before one of their players serves the ball. To decrease the competitive elements of the game, teams can “mix” their players before they start the game (as shown below), and then “inter-rotate” only when the server is changed on one side of the court, as indicated in the following diagram:



The concept of play diagrammed above is *not* simply an “ivory-tower” theory. Years ago, a missionary friend challenged me to incorporate this method into the competitive volleyball team of which I was a member. I demurred. However, when I became the physical-education teacher of extremely rivalrous 7th and 8th graders, I decided to try his system. I was pleasantly surprised at

the immediate improvement in student attitudes and in the spirit and atmosphere of the game.

Major Factors

Similar changes can be made to the rules of many, if not most, other games. In brief, the major factors to consider when modifying rules are as follows:

1. *Time*: Set reasonable time limits for completing the game;²⁶

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2. *Target*: Establish a goal for players to reach, such as 15 points in volleyball;

3. *Technique*: Teach players the basic rules of the modified game;

4. *Tactics*: Encourage participants to master the necessary skills;

5. *Talent*: Help players develop their individual talents;

6. *Teamwork*: Encourage the players to form one team against inanimate targets;

7. *Testimony*: Find creative ways for students to regularly share the positive lessons learned from playing the game.

Approaching sports in this way will help students put into practice the biblical injunctions for Christians to exhibit a self-sacrificial, cooperative attitude. "Honor one another above yourselves . . . Live in harmony with one another"; "Through love serve one another"; and thus "bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ."²⁷ As Ellen White noted: "In *true education* the selfish ambition, the greed for power, the disregard for the rights and needs of humanity, that are the curse of our world, find a counterinfluence."²⁸ Indeed, "the evidence clearly shows that cooperation is superior to competition in producing desirable affective learning and in helping students develop skills in dealing with other people."²⁹ Since "God's ideal is cooperation,"³⁰ all educators are thus

challenged to provide this kind of education for every student.³¹

Promoting cooperation does not mean de-emphasizing quality. On the contrary, the Christian is challenged to "do all to the glory of God," and to "do [everything] with all your might."³² Furthermore, "condemning" competitive sports does not negate the need for physical exercise, as can be seen from the suggestions above on how to "transform" competitive games into cooperative ones.

In the absence of sufficient manual labor opportunities, Adventist sports and health researcher David Nieman notes that aerobic exercises such as jogging, brisk walking, swimming, and cycling, along with activities such as flexibility exercises and weight-lifting, will help enhance fitness.³³ In addition, "Outdoor recreational activities such as sailing, canoeing, wilderness survival, camping, and backpacking might be given more room in our student programs."³⁴

Edward Norton's challenge to all committed redemptive educators regarding the indispensability of creating a classroom atmosphere where self-sacrifice reigns can be applied to all campus activities, including sports and recreation:

"[The curriculum committee must create] a learning environment in which *cooperation* and *service* to each other replaces the spirit of competition and a 'me first' social psychology. . . . For too long the grading and honors system has been based on self-glorification and conquest of others, an alien philosophy to that of the Christian principle of *selfless service* to and affirmation of others. How much better it would be if teachers would encourage students to assist each other to reach the highest level of achievement possible, not to best someone else, but to develop skills and attitudes which glorify God and benefit others! In this manner the classroom becomes a laboratory for the Body of Christ—a mini-Christian community: *Supporting, caring* and *servicing* each other. The teacher presides over this laboratory, modeling the compassionate lifestyle of Christ and assisting the students to imitate Him also."³⁵

This is the challenge to all educators, not just physical-education teachers! ☞

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An international race-walker and triathlete, he is actively involved in endurance activities and has a grave concern for the psychological effects and spiritual impact of competitive activities.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. See, for example, the emphasis placed by the books of Numbers (especially chapters 1 and 2) and Ezra (chapter 2) on the specific number of exiles who returned from Babylon and the thousands converted in the early

church (Acts 2:40-4:4).

2. See, for example, David's numbering of Israel (1 Chronicles 21).

3. Unless otherwise stated, all indicated Bible texts in this article are quoted from the New King James Version (NKJV).

4. 1 Peter 3:20; cf. Genesis 7:13.

5. At one institution, students initiated and conducted voluntary (i.e., not for "worship credit") 6 a.m. prayer groups, a Friday evening personal testimony service (prior to vespers), and a Wednesday evening outdoor Bible study session.

6. A study of Jesus' parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30) shows that it is right to appropriately recognize those who have developed their God-given gifts.

7. Humberto M. Rasi, "Worldviews, Contemporary Culture, and Adventist Education." Paper presented at the 27th International Faith and Learning Seminar, Mission College, Muak Lek, Thailand (December 3-15, 2000), p. 12.

8. The terms "sports and games" are used here to refer to activities such as soccer, basketball, tennis, or even table/board games such as monopoly, chess, etc. In this essay, sports and games are contrasted with "solo exercise" activities, such as swimming, jogging, gardening, hiking, or assembling jigsaw puzzles.

9. See, for example, Walter S. Hamerslough, "Physical Education and Sport From a Christian Perspective," *Christ in the Classroom: Adventist Approaches to the Integration of Faith and Learning* (Silver Spring, Md.: Institute for Christian Teaching, Education Department, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1994), vol. 10, pp. 205-219; P. Wayne Miller, "Team Sports in Adventist Education: Another Look," *ibid.*, vol. 19 (1997), pp. 189-203; Bruce G. Peifer, "Seventh-day Adventist Intercollegiate Competition: A North American Perspective," *ibid.*, pp. 245-264; Thomas A. Davis, "Incident on a Sunday Afternoon," *Adventist Review* (November 26, 1981), pp. 8, 9; David C. Nieman, "Do Sports Belong in SDA Schools?" *Ministry* (August 1988), pp. 4-9.

10. See, for example, the *Random House Dictionary*, the *Webster's New World Dictionary*, and the *American Heritage Dictionary*.

11. See Roger L. Dudley, "Competition and Cooperation in the Classroom: Which Goal Structure Is More Effective?" *Journal of Adventist Education* 44:2 (December 1981/January 1982), pp. 34, 35, 37, 38. While Dudley's article provides a useful summary of the work of other researchers, examples are somewhat confusing. For example, a baseball team is used to demonstrate "cooperation." Yet, all on that team work together to beat others and win. Similarly, a race is used to illustrate a "competitive" event. But, in running, one can strive to do one's best (without "artacking" anyone else); and more than one runner can achieve first place, resulting in a tie. This example would fit better under Dudley's category of "individualistic" goal structures.

12. Reuben Hilde, *Showdown: Can SDA Education Pass the Test?* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 1980), pp. 150, 151. Some biblical support for competitive activities are in the story of the talents. However, this parable talks about all individuals simply using their talents to the best of their ability for *God's glory*, without beating anyone in order to do so. Others quote 1 Corinthians 9:24-27, where Paul uses the metaphors of running and boxing. However, as Hilde (p. 162) notes, more careful study shows a "principle contrary" to competition—"Simply stated, it is that God does not provide a plan of salvation based upon competition or rivalry. . . . In reality, just the opposite is true. Whereas, in a race (in the games of this world), only one can win, the race for the crown of life may be won by all." (In support of this, Hilde quotes Luke 2:10 and 11; 1 Timothy 2:4; John 3:16; and Revelation 22:17). Still others believe that some competitive sports are an acceptable evangelistic method. Akers, challenging this, says: "It is highly debatable whether or not this mock warfare arena, with its self-glorification, rivalry, and killer instinct requirement (taking advantage of your brother's mistakes and missteps) is within the spirit of the gospel" (George H. Akers, "Adventist Varsity Sports?" *Adventists Affirm* [Spring 1990], p. 56.)

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13. Hilde, pp. 150, 151.

14. 2 Corinthians 10:12; Galatians 6:2-4, NIV; Philippians 2:3, NIV.

15. Marvin Moore, *How to Handle Competition* (Nashville, Tenn.: Southern Publ. Assn., 1978), p. 15 (italics added).

16. George R. Knight, *Myths in Adventism: An Interpretive Study of Ellen White, Education, and Related Issues* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 1985), p. 226 (italics added). As Akers reminds us: "The whole miserable sin chapter began by the question, 'Who is the greatest?'" (Akers, "Adventist Varsity Sports?" p. 55.)

17. Ellen G. White, *Manuscript Releases* (Silver Spring, Md.: Ellen G. White Estate, 1990), vol. 6, p. 117.

18. _____, "Christ, Man's Example," *Review and Herald* (September 4, 1900), p. 215.

19. The word *American* was added, since this was the type of "football" Ellen White was referring to. This does not mean that soccer (known as "football" in many parts of the world) does not come under this note of caution, as can be seen in the fourth sentence of this quotation.

20. Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1903), p. 210 (italics added).

21. George H. Akers, "An Appeal to the Health and PE Teachers of the North American Church School System," *Ministry* (August 1988), p. 7. Though Akers was dealing specifically with interschool league sports, the

concept he outlines clearly applies to all competitive sports, indeed all competitive activities.

22. See also Shirl J. Hoffman, "The Sanctification of Sport: Can the Mind of Christ Coexist With the Killer Instinct?" *Christianity Today* (April 4, 1986), p. 18.

23. See, for example, Hilde, page 160. Hoffman (p. 18) says: "Sports psychologist Bruce Ogilvie reported: 'Almost every true great athlete we have interviewed during the last four years . . . has consistently emphasized that in order to be a winner you must retain the killer instinct.'"

24. This factor seems to be corroborated by the large numbers of people crowding sports stadiums, while many churches have few attendees; some writers also see sports as "religion;" see, for example, Hoffman, pages 20 and 21.

25. As Hoffman notes, "the spiritual graces of compassion and sensitivity can place second to" winning (p. 18).

26. This is especially true for table/board games, such as the modified game of Monopoly, called "Co-opoly." While the major aim in Monopoly is to accumulate as much wealth as possible, even bankrupting other players in the process, the principles and guidelines of Co-opoly seek to promote and inculcate the Christian values of compassion, community concern, self-sacrificial service, other-centeredness, a Christ-focused striving for excellence, etc.

27. Romans 12:10, 16, NIV; Galatians 5:13; 6:2.

28. Ellen G. White, *Child Guidance* (Nashville, Tenn.: Southern Publishing Association, 1954), p. 293 (italics added).

29. Dudley, p. 38.

30. Knight, p. 226. Secular research is now showing that unselfishness and cooperation are more effective than competition, in the classroom and on the job. See Jim Roy, "'Interscholastic Sports and Competition: No,'" *Adventist Review* (October 13, 1988), pp. 13-14.

31. For an example of scores of cooperative games, see Susan Butler, *Non-Competitive Games for People of All Ages* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Bethany House Publ., 1986).

32. 1 Corinthians 10:31; Ecclesiastes 9:10.

33. Nieman, p. 8.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

35. Edward M. Norton, "The Philosophy of Christian Service and Its Practice in the Seventh-day Adventist Senior Academies of the United States During the 1979-1980 School Year" (Ed.D. dissertation, Andrews University, 1985), pp. 249, 250 (italics added).