

Feeling Torn Between Church and Youth Sports?

Reframing the conversation to find a way forward.

ABBY PERRY

Discover how Baylor's Truett Seminary is merging faith and athletics to benefit young athletes.

Youth sports have become a \$37 billion industry in the United States. And for many families, these sports aren't just a pastime—they're a lifestyle. Schedules revolve around practices, budgets buckle under equipment costs, and identities feel intertwined with team colors and personalized bleacher seats. For Christian parents, this athletic boom presents a unique challenge: how to reconcile faith with the pressures and priorities of the sports world.

It can be tempting to believe that the only options are total rejection or complete immersion. Pastors also feel this tension, missing those families who are regular attenders during the off-season but then travel for eight weeks straight when their daughter's team makes it to the playoffs.

What if this clash could be an opportunity for growth, not a source of frustration? What if we could find ways to nurture both the athletic spirit and the spiritual life in young people? Experts in faith and sports are beginning to champion a more redemptive lens for navigating these questions.

From Obstacle to Opportunity

For parents and pastors who are exhausted from trying to hold the tension, or those too hesitant to even engage with the topic, finding creative solutions can feel daunting. That's why Brian and Linsey Smith, sports ministry leaders with Athletes in Action, advocate for honest conversations that are grounded in biblical truths and offer realistic reflections on the challenges and opportunities found in youth sports.

The playing field can be a powerful stage for modeling how to "rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn" (Rom. 12:15). It's fertile ground for discussing the fruit of the Spirit and a living example of Colossians 3:23's call: "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord." Through sports, we are each invited to imagine how swinging a golf club, lifting weights through the burn, or embracing defeat (or victory) with grace can be an act of reverent worship.

To explore these ideas, the Smiths facilitated small group discussions in which parents shared successful and challenging experiences integrating sports into their faith-centered family life. Pausing a child's participation for a season proved beneficial for some, offering rest, financial management, and stronger family bonds. Others still felt utterly exhausted—but it was only midseason and their kids were starting on two different travel teams. These diverse experiences sparked discussions about the values driving their sports decisions and how to practice those values more intentionally.

Beyond skill development, sports offer countless opportunities for organic discipleship. As parents observe their children in practice and games, they gain insights into their character, revealing struggles, insecurities, and strengths. Bearing witness to these highs and lows cultivates a natural curiosity in a parent—not just about how a child has mastered a technical skill, but how they handle victory and defeat, how their self-esteem manages the ebbs and flows of competition, and how they interact with authority and teammates. These observations then become teachable moments, allowing parents to guide their children towards developing both athletic skills and a strong character informed by their faith.

Parents can also model how faith infuses everyday life through sports. Early morning swim meets offer an opportunity to "do everything without grumbling or arguing" (Phil. 2:14), for both athlete and parent. When the coaches' or referees' decisions trigger frustration or disrespect, it presents a teachable moment after emotions have settled. Gentle questions can prompt reflection, helping children better understand why they may have reacted the way they did, and then leaving them with a reminder that their worth isn't tied to game outcomes but to a loving God.

In its brightest moments, sports illuminate God's character and love for humanity. A child's dedication to practice and improvement mirrors God's own delight in good work. When a team perseveres through tough seasons, their unwavering support and camaraderie showcase God's design for mutual encouragement. Both parents and pastors can affirm young athletes who find joy in the game, reminding them that their pleasure is a reflection of being "fearfully and wonderfully made" to experience God's delight in all they do (Ps. 139:14).

Parents can feel like there's no end in sight for their career as a chauffeur-counselor-cheerleader, so adding in discipling via direct conversations can feel like too much pressure. But as they say, the sports seasons may be long, but the years are short. And thankfully, every car ride doesn't need to be a Bible lesson. The fabric of everyday moments—carpool singalongs, post-practice cheers, quiet reflections after a tough game—will naturally create transformative opportunities. Whether young athletes pursue an athletic career fueled by faith or embark on a professional journey where their perseverance and teamwork shine, the character formed through sports will equip them to thrive.

Gathered and Sent

While sports offer a rich environment for spiritual growth, they cannot replace the vital church community. In fact, 50 years ago Christian sports leaders were already [raising the alarm](#) about the "fuzzy, cuddly monster" of the youth sports industry and the tendency of Christians "to rationalize and compromise for it."

Back then, historian Paul Putz notes, organized competition for children and teenagers rarely occurred on Sundays. Parents may have struggled with the demands of youth sports, but they did not feel pressured to regularly skip Sunday morning worship. Now, participation on travel teams usually requires weekends away from home, often for months of the year.

This should create a sense of tension for pastors and parents. The spiritual growth that can happen through sports cannot replace the vital community found in the church. Hebrews 10:25 says that Christians are called to not [give] up meeting together." This verse, nestled within the broader context of Scripture, emphasizes God's desire for his people to experience belonging, encouragement, and love. Acts 2:42 paints a beautiful picture of the early church where these values were lived out in their devotion "to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer."

In this way, the church serves as a gathered and sent community. It provides a haven of support where everyone—parents and children alike—can embrace and contribute to its work in the world. It's not about obligation; it's about participating in this collective, symbiotic journey of faith and love.

Easy answers are scarce, but seeking guidance and exploring creative solutions help many begin to integrate these competing priorities, always with the goal to bring youth sports into the life and work of the church.

That process is made easier when pastors are eager to build innovative and inclusive spaces for sports-oriented believers. Interested churches can explore offering small groups that delve into the intersection of faith and youth sports. Rather than creating rigid expectations, these groups would foster genuine communities built on

shared joy and challenges. Some churches might consider adding a Saturday or Sunday evening service. Additionally, high school Bible studies could experiment with meeting after weeknight practices, even at a local restaurant to allow hungry athletes a chance to refuel.

Inspiring examples from athletes and others offer further guidance for those seeking to integrate sports and faith. Scottie Reynolds, a 2010 All-American basketball player at Villanova, viewed his faith as non-negotiable. More than once, he ran into the gym during his team's half-time, yanking off his dress shirt and tie from church so he could play in the third quarter.

As a mom of four athletes, Tracey Jones regularly hosted team events after recognizing the potential impact of these gatherings. Years later, her children's former teammates acknowledge how meaningful her hospitality was. Jones credits her pastor, who offered unwavering support, never judging her family's spotty attendance but instead regularly asking, "How can I help equip and empower you?"

Chris Railey, a pastor at Oaks Church in Red Oak, TX, is trying to support the "Tracey Jones" in his own congregation by actively ministering to sports-playing families. He has set out to create small groups for travel teams, finding ways to help families listen to and discuss sermons together on the road.

And down the road in League City, TX, One Church has "adopted" their local football team, supporting players through care packages, a preseason meet-and-greet, and regular game attendance.

From pastors and churches to athletes and parents, people are finding small ways to bring their love of sports into the life and work of the church. Now just imagine a future where youth sports and faith flourish together, nurturing the spiritual and physical well-being of young athletes.

At Baylor's Truett Seminary, the [**Faith & Sports Institute**](#) (FSI) isn't just imagining this future—they're actively creating it by empowering Christian leaders in sports to approach their roles with a redemptive lens. Through insightful conversations, research, and practical tools, FSI equips individuals to create positive and faith-filled environments for young athletes, fostering a harmonious blend of athletic excellence and spiritual growth.

*Ready to explore how faith and sports can intersect for the glory of God? Check out FSI's [**graduate programs**](#), [**continuing education offerings**](#), and [**online resources**](#). [**Start your journey today.**](#)*

© 2024 Christianity Today - a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.