

When Ball Becomes Baal

By Jim Elliff

It's rare to see kids playing sports in the neighborhood anymore. We're now organized and "professionalized"—including uniforms, stat-of-the-art facilities, endless trips to the field, competitive coaches, equally competitive parents, and the after-season tournaments designed to give parents "bleacher bottom." In addition, you've got to pay to play—and when you've paid that much, you'll be *sure* to play.

It is also fun, and it can be instructive. I love to watch my kids play sports. In fact, they need to play—*some*.

But, it's not so easy as handing over seventy bucks and saying, "Sign up Johnny and Susie this year." Making that decision means that you may be out four to five times each week during the season. Soon sports becomes all about calendarization and control of your life—especially if you have more than one kid. Perhaps nothing outside of a change in your job has so much potential to turn the family schedule upside down.

"This man understands," you say.

Now comes the part you won't like: "Behold, I say unto you, you have made sports the household god." Too strong? OK, not *all* of you. But the deification of sports *is* happening to many.

How does ball become Baal? Answer: When it controls you, and you give it devoted worship. It is around your god that you order your life—and you can almost never say "no" to it.

Like "athlete's foot" on the hygienically-challenged teenager, sports has taken over more and more of the life of believers. Almost overnight we have awakened to the sad fact that, in many communities, sports has even usurped the hours believers meet on the Lord's Day. All too often members are saying to church leaders, "We'll be gone next Sunday because of the soccer tournament." In turn, leaders are supposed to acquiesce humbly. After all, we can't afford to appear "legalistic;" everyone knows that the greatest crime a church can commit is to demand something of someone.

You'll hear, "But the team *needs* all the players. We can't let the team down." It never occurs to them that the church *Body* is being deprived of a necessary body part, or that God is marginalized and disobeyed. We are not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together, states God in Hebrews 10:25.

Devotion is the operative word. When the team says, "We need you," we sacrifice to do it. But when it crosses the time allotted to edification and worship, the Ruler of the universe is often sent to the bench. In the process, we teach our children that devotion to sports is more important than both devotion to God and loyalty to our spiritual family. Have you considered that you may be teaching your kids to worship *sports*?

Here are some ways to put sports in the proper place:

First, decide beforehand that there will be no contest between the church's essential activities designed for your family's spiritual growth and what the team plans for your lives. If you will talk this over ahead of time with your child and then the coach, there will be no confusion. Through the years I've found that many coaches respect that decision. But, it must be a *prior* decision, not one made on a case-by-case basis. When sports conflicts with Sunday worship or youth camp or a special spiritual activity, the decision has already been made.

Secondly, determine that your children cannot play every sport. There is a sanctity to the home life that must be protected. You need quiet evenings at home. You need meals together. Just let your children know that you are excited about sports, but there are limits. You then determine what those limits are. For us, we attempt to have only one sport per year for each child.

Finally, think about some creative choices. One of my sons played basketball, but the season was interminably long. I was also traveling. So, I would be gone speaking over the weekend, then, when I was home, I was out two or more nights sitting on the sidelines watching my son practice. It was not really "time together." This wasn't going to work.

The solution came to me after prayer. I asked him if he would be willing to learn golf in the place of basketball. We could play together, along with his brother, and we could do it whenever we wanted. We could enjoy this for the rest of our lives. I've paid some extra money, but I've bought back some time with my sons and some good exercise for me also. It's a bargain.

God Himself uses sports language in the New Testament. He's not against them, unless it steals the devotion belonging to Him. All other gods have to go!



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