



Studying ... Sport and Exercise Science?

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"Just playing sport?"

Being a student of Sport and Exercise Science, it is important that you are prepared for three years of questions like, "So do you just play sport all day?" and other insinuations that this particular course is not the height of academia. It may be as much of a shock to you as to others that there is actually work involved in a sport science degree. It's really varied and generally interesting because it's all about sport.

I am sure that one sport science student's experience is vastly different to another's, so my plan is to tell you a bit about my experience and hope that it is in some way helpful to you. My experience may not be the most representative as I focused mainly on the exercise physiology and sports nutrition side of things and didn't do a great deal of sport psychology or sociology over the course of my degree. I have broken things down into *Being a Christian and the subject-matter* and *Being a Christian and the sports culture*.

Being a Christian and the subject-matter

Sport science covers a huge range of disciplines and subjects from policy to psychology to physiology (and other subjects that don't begin with 'p'). It is difficult to identify and address all the possible issues that may arise for Christians. There are however a few assumptions that pop up in various modules along the way.

Rarely, in my experience, was God overtly opposed; however, God was generally omitted. In

sport psychology, the idea of people being motivated by a desire to glorify God is not even considered. God's role as creator is not acknowledged in physiology nor His role as judge taken into account in discussion of ethics in sport. God is replaced with a number of substitutes; extrinsic reward, the theory of evolution and the human conscience and sometimes even with sport itself.

Today's culture has raised sport up to be an instrument of power and influence. In a speech endorsing London as the host city for the 2012 Olympics, Nelson Mandela said: "Sport has the power to change the world, the power to inspire, the power to unite people in a way that little else can ... sport can create hope ... it is an instrument for peace". Sport can be made out to be the answer to all the world's problems. I have found that this worldview is peddled nowhere more blatantly than in the sport science lecture theatre.

Sport is brilliant and can have a really beneficial impact, but this view that sport can solve everything completely replaces God with sport – the creator with something He created. These assumptions pervade much of the subject matter and it's easy to not even notice them. It's a good idea to really think about what you're being told and what the underlying notions are. Being aware of this can also be helpful in discussing these issues with course mates, and may lead to the opportunity to share the gospel and get them thinking.

After completing your sport science degree, there aren't loads of jobs available in sport. Particularly in the current economic situation lots of sports funding has been cut and thus there are fewer jobs than before. With the small number of jobs available competition is pretty fierce. To get a job in sport science, especially working with elite athletes, it is often necessary to be quite tunnel-visioned and willing to give up a lot to achieve success in this area. I'm sure this is true of many jobs; it is just something to be aware of.

Being a Christian and the sports culture

Probably the greatest challenge, and at the same time the greatest opportunity, as a Christian studying sport science is the fact that you are surrounded by sports people and the sports

culture and quite possibly will be playing sport yourself. You may be well accustomed to sports culture, but university sport can be a bit of a shock to the system.

For many sports people at university it is their sport that defines them. Their identity, security and their treasure lie in their sporting ability and success; they have effectively made sport their god. If sport is what gives your life meaning, then this will lead to pride when you're doing well and feelings of worthlessness when you aren't. If you are injured or lose your place in the team to another player then what do you have left?

As Christians we know that sport is not our god but a good gift from the true God. He has given us the ability to play and enjoy sport but He has given it to us to use for His glory. We go wrong when we start to worship and serve the created thing instead of the creator God and put our trust and security in anything other than the God of the universe. The desire to honour God with your sport will set you apart from your team mates and impact the way you play, the way you relate to others and the decisions you make on and off the pitch.

On the pitch...

There are amazing moments; when you beat the last defender and flick the ball past the keeper into the top corner; when you make a three-pointer right on the buzzer to win the game; when you all pull together and work hard as a team, when you really push yourself and achieve a PB (personal best) and as you will know there are so many more moments that are just as exciting and exhilarating.

But there are also moments in sport when you are tempted to go for a cheap shot at your opponent when the referee isn't looking, when you're furious with your teammates for not giving it their all, when you can't believe the referee would make such a bad call – and you let him know it, when you're kept on the bench even though you're a better player than the third-year who also plays your position. In these moments what do you do?

Off the pitch...

There are the times when you are all on the coach back from an away game and having a laugh and joking together, when you have a team

pasta-party the night before a big game, when you make friends that last long after university ends and when you all dress up like pirates or superheroes and dance the night away.

As well as all these great things there is initiation, drinking, banter gone too far, gossip, back-biting and other situations that Christians can find themselves thrown right in the middle of it. What would you do, what would you say?

The Solution...

Wishful thinking – it's not that easy! There is no 'flick-a-switch' remedy or easy answer.

In the sports culture; drinking, banter, aggression, gossip, rivalry, obscenity and pride are rife. For some people it would seem that the logical course of action would be to avoid the whole scene completely and have nothing to do with sport, but then who would be getting alongside sports players and shining for Jesus?

It is difficult to refuse that one drink too many when everyone else is drinking; it is difficult to draw the line when banter is getting out of hand; it is difficult to praise God and be thankful when you play well and when you play terribly and it is difficult to say no when your captain asks you to lie to the referee, but how God is glorified when you do! And how many of your team mates will ask why?

These challenging situations will arise, where it is possible to go along with what everyone else is doing or to stand out and instead do what is most honouring to God, showing that Jesus is your treasure. When they do arise, it is really tough to know what to do in the heat of the moment.

I found that it's so helpful to think through these situations before you have to face them. For example, to decide before you go out how many drinks you will have; to decide what to say when someone asks you why you aren't getting drunk and to pray that God will help you to honour Him when it comes to the crunch.

So...

These are big issues to think through and deal with and I can't give you all the answers, let alone in a few paragraphs of my babblings. Whilst I was

at university I was part of a Christians in Sport (CIS) group: we met once a week for an hour to look at what the Bible said about a particular issue for sports people, to pray for each other and our non-Christian team mates and to encourage each other in sharing the gospel with them and playing our sport in a way that honours God.

To meet with other Christians who understood the struggles and the excitement and the opportunity of being a Christian in a sports club and who were trying to share the gospel in a similar setting was really helpful. It was also brilliant to study the Bible and apply it specifically to a sporting context.

Another way to get connected, involved and supported is to join a CIS sports network – providing an opportunity to meet others who play your sport around the country, to encourage one another in living out your faith in your sport and to consider ways that you can share the gospel in your sports network.

I went along to some training events that Christians in Sport put on to really get to grips with what it looks like to represent Jesus in a sports club and specific sporting situations, to pray for your non-Christian team mates, to play in a way that honours God on and off the pitch and to say something of the good news of Jesus when the opportunities come. There are a lot of great resources on the CIS website, www.christiansinsport.org.uk and you can get in touch with them to find out about a CIS group at your university (email universitiesport@christiansinsport.org.uk).

I loved playing sport at university and there were definite ups and downs but given the chance I'd do it again (hopefully a bit differently having learnt from my experiences). There are tough times but there are brilliant times and chances to share the good news of Jesus with lost people.

Studying sport science was really enjoyable and if you're thinking about it or are currently in the midst of it, make the most of it, enjoy it, weigh-up what you're told, be watchful and make the most of the opportunity to live and speak for Jesus.

Useful Links:

Christians in Sport www.christiansinsport.org.uk

Stuart Weir *What the Book Says about Sport* (BRF, 2000) [Image]

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