

Pool-playing Pastor Finds Ministry By Building Friendships

The Wired Word for the Week of January 15, 2023

In the News

Earlier this month, Tom Reynolds, a retired pastor, published his account of how he took up the game of billiards and discovered a new tool for ministry. It started when his mother moved into an adult retirement facility and began playing pool with a group of women. Reynolds would often join them when he needed a break from his work responsibilities, and eventually connected with men in the retirement community who also played the game.

Over time, his skills improved as he learned from his new friends. Word spread, until he became a minor local celebrity with a cue stick. People in the congregation took delight in introducing him as the preacher the search committee found in a pool hall.

"When the word gets around that the pastor is a proficient pool player, men will come out of the woodwork to challenge him," Reynolds wrote. "And he will grow in their esteem."

Reynolds gradually came to view his new hobby as a rich path to ministry, as much as it was a stress reliever. Because "men gravitate to those who share some activity in common," he said he was able to develop more relationships with men than his formal identity as a clergy member afforded. "I have a wider circle of male friends than at any other time in my life," he wrote. Many of those friendships turned into opportunities for ministry and mentorship.

Reynolds practiced what some might call "friendship evangelism," which is a way of entering people's lives through activities that interest them, in order to bring good news that will benefit them.

In his recent op-ed for *The New York Times*, ["Why Jesus Loved Friendship,"](#) author Peter Wehner asserted that building relationships based on shared common interests is essentially what God did in the Incarnation, when God entered the human experience in the form of a baby. Wehner said he found the idea that Jesus calls his disciples his friends rather than his servants ([John 15:12-17](#)) astonishing.

Wehner quoted John Swinton, a Church of Scotland minister: "Why would a divine, transcendent entity, referred to in the Scriptures as the everlasting God, the Lord Most High, not only condescend to become human but also initiate a relationship with us that is defined by mutual affection, intimacy and self-revelation?"

It would be unthinkable for earthly kings to describe their relationship with their subjects using such an intimate term as "friendship," Wehner continued. "In ancient times people of unequal wealth and status were very unlikely to be friends. But Jesus shattered those expectations and the hierarchical relationship between God and human beings."

"Jesus is elevating his listeners," philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff told Wehner, "treating them as on a level with him." That means that he built relationships on love, not on power. It also means leaving room for people to accept or decline our offer of friendship, just as Jesus did with humanity in general ([John 1:11-12](#)) and with Judas Iscariot in particular ([John 13:21-26](#); [Matthew 26:47-50](#)).

By offering ourselves as friends and by letting people know that we value their friendship, we can enter into their life experience the way Jesus did.

Reynolds found that when he engaged people in familiar activities, doors often opened for deeper conversations about things that really matter. Such activities provided opportunities for him to encourage and pray for others and to model Christlike behavior his friends could emulate.

While he recognizes that billiards is not the game for every pastor or every Christian who wants to reach people with the gospel of Jesus the Christ, Reynolds suggests that any relaxing, enjoyable activity can be a productive route to meaningful relationships in which intimacy and genuine ministry can happen.

More on this story can be found at these links:

[In Praise of Billiards: A Tool For Ministry. Baptist News](#)
[Using the Sport of Billiards to Spread the Gospel. God Uses Everyday Things ... Even Me](#)
[Gospel Trick Shot Ministries Welcome! Gospeltrickshot.org](#)
[Steve Lillis: The Pastor Shoots Pool \(Video 3:44\). CBN](#)
[Sharing the Light -- Robin "The BankRoll" Dodson. azbilliards](#)

Applying the News Story

While there is no "Book of Sports" in the Bible, there are examples of athletes and sport metaphors in our sacred text that are used to instruct the reader about life and spirituality. Many skills displayed by athletes today have their roots in activities (such as hunting, fishing, running fast and fighting) needed for survival.

Some of these activities or events which have modern-day sports counterparts include: Esau (hunting) ([Genesis 25:27](#)); Jacob wrestled with God and prevailed, suffering a "sports injury" that left him limping ([Genesis 32:24-32](#)); Samson, whose strength came from God, could have competed in weight lifting or bodybuilding or the decathlon if he were alive today ([Judges 16:28-30](#)); Jonathan (archery) ([1 Samuel 20:35-42](#)); David was strong and skilled, a dancer as well as a good aim with a slingshot ([1 Samuel 17:34-35; 48-51](#); [2 Samuel 6:14](#)).

Four of Jesus' disciples were fishermen. Jesus often spoke their language of fishing and went out on the Sea of Galilee with them. ([Matthew 4:18-22](#)).

[21 Motivating Sports Bible Verses for Athletes](#) gives many biblical principles athletes can use to shape their approach to training and competition, as well as to life in general. Some concepts

mentioned in the Bible that apply to the world of sports and life are: the need for training in godliness ([1 Timothy 4:8](#)); the determination to endure when things get tough ([Revelation 14:12](#)); the importance of integrity, honesty and playing by the rules ([2 Timothy 2:5](#)); the need to wait on the Lord for power, strength and renewal ([Isaiah 40:28-31](#))

The Big Questions

1. Why might some people view sport as a hindrance to one's spiritual growth?
2. How can sport be used to help Christian athletes grow deeper in their faith and be ambassadors for Christ in their sport and larger sphere of influence?
3. What strategies might you use to creatively reach athletes in your community with the Gospel?
4. What activities does your church support and engage in that are not explicitly religious in nature? Why are you involved in these activities, and how are they integrated into your overall mission?
5. How can people involved in sports ministry ensure that the activities are ethical and beneficial to participants and the community, rather than sports-themed gimmicks used by hucksters for ulterior purposes?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

1 Chronicles 16:28-29

*Ascribe to the LORD, O families of the peoples,
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.*

*Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name;
bring an offering and come before him.*

Worship the LORD in holy splendor ... (For context, read [1 Chronicles 16:28-34](#).)

1 Corinthians 10:31

So, whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God. (For context, read [1 Corinthians 10:23-24, 31-33](#).)

Romans 12:1

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, on the basis of God's mercy, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your reasonable act of worship. (For context, read [Romans 12:1-2](#).)

These verses, taken together, emphasize the responsibility we have to give God credit for all God's many blessings. That means we are to speak and act in a way that gives honor to God, acknowledging that any athletic ability we have comes from God. We are to thank God and give God glory whether we perform well or simply participate in our sport.

Worship is not confined to buildings that are dedicated for religious purposes. In athletic training and competition, in pools, pool halls, on track and field, mat and mountain, we can offer our bodies to God in living acts of worship.

In the larger context of the Corinthian passage, Paul explains that we best glorify God by doing things not for ourselves, but to build up and benefit others.

In "[What Does the Bible Say About Sport?](#)" Pete Nicholas, of Inspire Church London, points out that "sport is part of God's good gift of creation. ... where does our playfulness come from? The creativity, the desire for human relationship, and the instinctive desire to play that all people, of all ages, across all cultures have, are all part of what it means to be made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). ... Sport is not some area outside of God's good creation, it is an integral part of it, a gift to be enjoyed to his glory."

Nicholas asks: "How many Christians don't just play sport but actually see that their sport and faith are integrated? Not separate areas -- 'I go to church on Sunday and play sport during the week' -- but integrated -- 'I play sport as part of a whole life view of worship'?"

Dual Olympic gold medalist breaststroker, Penny Heyns, said she viewed swimming laps in the pool as an opportunity to worship God. "I committed to giving my whole being and heart to God in every moment of my swimming," she said.

Questions: Why is it right to give God glory for the things we are able to accomplish in sports or any other activity, for that matter? How does the drive to do our best and to compete at the highest level of which we are capable square with competing in a way that builds up and benefits others?

Matthew 1:22-23

All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

*"Look, the virgin shall become pregnant and give birth to a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel,"*

which means, "God is with us." (For context, read [Matthew 1:18-24](#).)

Reynolds, the pool-playing pastor in the News, learned the value of entering into the life experiences of people in the community. He knew nothing about billiards at first, but intentionally sought to learn the game, just to be present, first with his mother and her friends, and later with men who also gathered around.

A classic Bette Midler song suggests that God is watching humanity "[From a Distance](#)," but the Bible teaches us that the Lord is near ([Philippians 4:5](#)), that in Christ, God brings near those who were far from God ([Ephesians 2:13](#)). When Jesus was born, he was named Emmanuel, meaning "God is with us."

What does all this mean? That God is committed to the ministry of presence, first, by being with us in the person of Christ incarnate, and second, by being present with us when the Holy Spirit fills us ([Acts 2:4](#)).

But there's more! In [Colossians 1:27](#), we read about "Christ in you, the hope of glory." The God who is with us as a companion desires an even more intimate relationship. How can the person of Christ be *in* us? The language calls to mind the presence of new life in a mother's womb. Can there be a closer relationship than that?

Questions: If Christ who is God With Us, Emmanuel, is also *in* us, then what happens when we make ourselves available, when we are present with people in the community, the way Reynolds tries to be when he shoots pool at his mother's retirement center? How could the fact that God is with us and in us while we spend time with people help them understand that God is with them, too? How does this shape our own ministry of presence?

Philippians 2:3-5

Do nothing from selfish ambition or empty conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus ... (For context, read [Philippians 2:1-8](#).)

Reynolds might well have found other ways to spend his time when he needed a break from work. Yet he decided to learn an unfamiliar sport that interested his mother more than it interested him. He began to adopt the interests of others as his own, and that led, serendipitously, to rich and rewarding friendships and meaningful ministry.

Of course, Jesus' adoption of our interests was infinitely more significant than learning a new skill or sport. He made our need of salvation his priority, even sacrificing his own life for us. While most of us will likely never be required to give our physical bodies to save someone, we can assume the same mindset Jesus had, that looks to the interests of others.

Questions: When have you seen athletes look out for their own interests? How did that impact their performance? Their relationships? Their influence?

When have you seen athletes look out for the interests of others? How did that affect the way they played? Their relationships? Their influence?

What are some practical ways you can look to the interests of others?

1 Corinthians 9:24-27

Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it. Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one. So I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air, but I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified. (For context, read [1 Corinthians 9:13-27](#).)

Running and finishing a race as a metaphor for moving forward in our spiritual life appears in several passages: [Galatians 5:7](#); [2 Timothy 4:6-8](#); [Hebrews 12:1-2](#).

In this passage from 1 Corinthians, Paul uses images from boxing and racing to make his point, that he runs his spiritual race with the discipline of a committed athlete who "is in it to win it," as they say. But his prize is people (vv. 19, 22).

What is his strategy? To identify closely with people, whether he had a lot or not much in common with them at all. To the Jews he "became as a Jew," to non-Jews he became as a non-Jew. He entered into the life experience of different groups of people in order to bring them the good news of Jesus the Christ.

Questions: What tools do you use to help you stay focused on the goal of winning the prize of bringing the good news of Jesus to people who need to meet him? What are you willing to do to "become as" a group of people who need to hear Jesus' message?

For Further Discussion

1. Scan [The Competitor's Creed](#) found on the Christian Pool Players Association website. What principles stand out to you in the creed? What biblical foundation supports these principles? What, if anything, would you add or subtract from the creed, and why?

2. In the article, "[Using the Sport of Billiards to Spread the Gospel](#)," the website, *God Uses Everyday Things ... Even Me*, presents this couplet, that some might view as cutesy or tacky:

Follow Through on God's Cue
to Rack Up more souls through You!

TWW team member Stan Purdum says this reminds him of a handsome young man in one of his churches who would date girls expressly to witness about Christ to them. Purdum always thought the man was lucky not to have received a black eye when the women involved learned his ulterior motive.

TWW team member Bill Tammeus wrote that he considers the expressed numbers game (like notches on a belt) not just tacky but out of harmony with the idea that it's not us but the Holy Spirit who draws people into faith.

How do you see the couplet, and why?

3. Discuss one or more of these quotes from [Eric Liddell](#), a Scottish Olympic champion in the 400 meter race and missionary who died in 1945 in a Japanese internment camp, whose story is told in the 1981 movie [Chariots of Fire](#):

- In the dust of defeat as well as the laurels of victory there is a glory to be found if one has done his best.
- I believe God made me for a purpose, but he also made me fast! And when I run I feel his pleasure.
- The secret of my success over the 400m is that I run the first 200m as fast as I can. Then, for the second 200m, with God's help I run faster.

- It has been a wonderful experience to compete in the Olympic Games and to bring home a gold medal. But since I have been a young lad, I have had my eyes on a different prize. You see, each one of us is in a greater race than any I have run in Paris, and this race ends when God gives out the medals.
- We are all missionaries. Wherever we go we either bring people nearer to Christ or we repel them from Christ.
- No man who really is a man ever cared for the easy task. There is no enjoyment in the game that is easily won. It is that in which you have to strain every muscle and sinew to achieve victory that provides real joy.

Responding to the News

1. Consider how your church could expand athletic or artistic opportunities or launch new recreation ministries for members of your congregation and community. How might you assess interest? What would be your goals for such a project? What resources and personnel (teachers, coaches, players, fan base, supporters, childcare providers, community allies) would be needed, and how would you secure them? Here are two resources you may find helpful: [8 Ways to Start a Sports Ministry](#) and [The Vision and Strategy for Building a Successful Sports Ministry \(Video 1:07:42\)](#).

2. Celebrate "Sports and Recreation" focus during worship and for a meal, at the beginning and/or end of a season. Can be an opportunity to raise awareness and support for this ministry, and to honor those who participated in the activity.

3. Explore the idea of offering a Gospel Trick Shot presentation in your church or community. Start here: [Other Christian Billiard Links](#).

Prayer suggested by [Hebrews 12:1-2](#)

We thank you, O God, for the great cloud of witnesses of faith surrounding us, cheering for us and encouraging us to stay the course as we follow Jesus. We are mindful of the trials they endured and the triumphs you gave them. Make us willing to lay aside every weight and clinging sin that hinders us, and help us run with perseverance the race that is set before us. Keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, who is seated at your right hand, having conquered sin and death for us, so that we may not grow weary in our souls or lose heart. Amen.