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## Ellen G. White and Competitive Sports

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WE DON'T have any record of the wins and losses of the Battle Creek College Bruisers or what ever they called their football team. Neither do we know who won the boxing matches in the basement of the college building. But Ellen G. White's statements in relation to exercise and recreational activity are clear enough without these backgrounds. As she viewed it, the worst possible situation would be for students, or any one else, to be without exercise. This basic point was stressed in her initial statement on education written in 1872. She expanded on this in *Education*: "Vigorous exercise the pupils must have. Few evils are more to be dreaded than indolence and aimlessness."--Page 210.

What will be the results of physical inaction? Three things: "The whole system is enervated and diseased" (*ibid.*, p. 208); "the mind often becomes unbalanced" (*ibid.*, p. 209); and the moral power is lessened and the "door is opened to impurity" (*ibid.*).

But these are only the general categories. Checking quickly in the Index under "Exercise (physical) Lack of" we discover a whole catalog of disasters. Blood circulation is depressed by lack of exercise, and the blood made impure. Mental powers are enfeebled and restricted, even mental breakdown is fostered by the lack of exercise. Ministers suffer and deteriorate as a result of this lack, and their poor health is often due to this cause. Muscles become flabby and enfeebled, the nervous system unbalanced; the skin, the veins, the bowels are all ill-affected, in short the "entire system suffers" from lack of exercise.

"The will goes with the labor of the hands," Ellen White says, "and when the will power is dormant, the imagination becomes abnormal, so that it is impossible for the sufferer to resist disease. In activity is the greatest curse that could come upon one in such a condition." --*Counsels on Health*, p. 199.

I am sure there is no argument on this point, but if the worst situation is inactivity, what, then, is the best situation?

"As a rule," Ellen White tells us, "the exercise most beneficial to the youth will be found in useful employment. The little child finds both diversion and development in play; and his sports should be such as to promote not only physical, but mental and spiritual growth. As he gains strength and intelligence, the best recreation will be found in some line of effort that is useful." --*Education*, p. 215.

In place of diversions that merely amuse, Ellen White tells us that "the Lord has declared that the better way is for . . . [students] to get physical exercise through manual training, and by letting useful employment take the place of selfish pleasure."--*Counsels to Parents and Teachers*, p. 354.

I am well aware that such counsel falls on our ears with a dull thud. But we must try to resist the temptation to tune these counsels out. When we examine the dangers of athletic sports, many of us, if we are candid about it, will discover that we ourselves are the victims of many of the dangers from which we so nobly seek to shield the youth. We should be honest enough to admit that our own tastes and desires can, in this situation, easily pervert our judgment or our receptivity to the message that the Spirit of God would have us hear.

When Ellen White tells us that "so far as possible, facilities for manual training should be connected with every school" (*Education*, p. 217), we are tempted to quickly put the emphasis on the qualifying phrase and decide that it is impossible.

And when she continues by pointing out that "to a great degree such training would supply the place of the gymnasium, with the additional benefit of affording valuable discipline," then we cling with all our strength to that qualifying phrase, "as far as possible"! But should we?

Shouldn't we rather be thinking of ways of making the saw, the hammer, the wrench, rake, and hoe, better able to compete with the tennis racket and the baseball bat? I am the first to admit that I thoroughly relished my college hours on the tennis court, but I recently had occasion to question the wisdom of those curriculum planners who sent me clear through to graduate school without my knowing how to replace the plumbing on the inside of a toilet.

Undoubtedly it sounds quaint to us when Ellen White says that "gardens, workshops, and treatment rooms should be provided" in our schools (*ibid.*, p. 218). But isn't it pitiful when someone who has been to college and had three years of graduate school can hardly get radishes to grow along the side of his house?

Ellen White says that "in planning for the culture of plants, let the teacher seek to awaken an interest in beautifying the school grounds and the schoolroom" (*ibid.*, p. 212). But she does not envision this as some kind of drudgery that the student must endure in order to make a little money to go on his account. She sees teachers and students working together on such projects, planning together, developing tastes, skills, and new and useful interests.

Now, I must confess I worked with the soil during my academy days. I hoed endless rows of bell peppers and tomatoes under a blazing California sun. But for some reason I rarely had a teacher out there with me, talking, teaching, sharing, or planning. "The sacrifice demanded of the teacher would be great," Ellen White admits, "but he would reap a rich reward." --*ibid.*

I rather think I would have reaped a rich reward as well, not only from the companionship of the teacher but from the opportunity to actually learn something about the soil and the plants over which I was sweating. How did I ever get through eighteen years of Adventist education and not know how to keep a lawn alive?

I do not mean to wander from Ellen White's counsels. I just mean to suggest that had they been followed I might have known as much about how to make my home attractive, pleasant, and valuable as I do about how to sink free-throws. I need to know right now how to walk around my chimney. I doubt if I will ever again really have to know how to make a turn-around jump shot.

But Ellen White does not pretend that every school will have an ideal program. She talks about how, in the early ages of the world, parents and children lived close to nature and studied its beauties and mysteries together (*ibid.*, p. 211), then she says:

"While we may not return fully to the simple habits of those early times, we may learn from them lessons that will make our seasons of recreation what the name implies seasons of true upbuilding of body and mind and soul." --*ibid.*

She also admits that "gymnastic exercises fill a useful place in many schools" (*ibid.*, 210). But she noted "they are often carried to excess." She told a medical student who wrote to her: "I do not condemn the simple exercise of playing ball." --*Selected Messages*, book 2, p. 322. But she said this too may be overdone.

What then are the hazards of an athletic program, and how can these be avoided?

As I began to write this article, two or three workmen were carrying on a conversation in the hall way of the General Conference, just outside my office. One was telling the others that he had just joined a bowling league. In his league was a woman who was a member of eight different leagues. The woman spent \$35 to \$40 a week on bowling.

"I do not condemn the simple exercise of playing ball," Ellen White said (but not in reference to bowling), "but this, even in its simplicity, may be overdone. I shrink always from the almost sure result which follows in the wake of these amusements. It leads to an outlay of means that should be expended in bringing the light of truth to souls." --Ibid.

Here, then, is one of the dangers of athletic sports: the expense involved. Naturally, the more professional the athletic program, the more structured the games, the more intense the competition, the greater will be the temptation to spend money for equipment, travel, rental of facilities, or, in the case of an institution, the construction and maintenance of sports facilities.

In this same passage, Ellen White says that it is "the way" that ball games "have been conducted at the college" at Battle Creek that "does not bear the impress of heaven. . . . There are threads leading out through the habits and customs and worldly practices, and the actors become so engrossed and infatuated that they are pronounced in heaven, lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God." --Ibid.

Here is a second danger in athletic sports. If they are not properly conducted they become engrossing and infatuating.

Let me now lay on the line most of the rest of Ellen White's cautions and counsels about athletic sports with one key quotation from *Education*:

"The games that occupy so much of ... [the student's] time are diverting the mind from study. They are not helping to prepare the youth for practical, earnest work in life. Their influence does not tend toward refinement, generosity, or real manliness.

"Some of the most popular amusements, such as 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 because of the excess to which they are carried, they stimulate the love of pleasure and excitement, thus fostering a distaste for useful labor, a disposition to shun practical duties and responsibilities. They tend to destroy a relish for life's sober realities and its tranquil enjoyments. Thus the door is opened to dissipation and lawlessness, with their terrible results." --Pages 210, 211.

Look again at this quotation and ask yourself this question: Is it not true that every danger brought to view here is all the more hazardous the more intense the competition becomes?

The more competition involved, the more the student's time is consumed and the more he is diverted from preparation for practical life. The more intense the competition, the more brutal the game becomes as any football or basketball fan can tell you. The greater the competitive incentive, the greater the love for victory, the love of domination. Winning is the only thing. The future is now. Losing is like death. The more intense the competition, the more reckless becomes the disregard of life. When competitive factors dominate an athletic event, that is when the stimulation and pleasure is the greatest, when practical duties are most likely to be neglected, when life's sober realities and tranquil enjoyments lose their relish, and the door is opened most widely to dissipation.

During the bicycle craze of the 1890's, Ellen White was called by her Guide, who said, "Follow Me." She was shown some things that cannot be dismissed with the mere observation that bicycles were more expensive in those days. She was shown some things that are applicable to any situation where athletic competition takes precedence over the balanced development of the body, mind, and spirit for the glory of God.

"A bewitching influence seemed to be passing as a wave over our people there [in Battle Creek], and I saw that this would be followed by other temptations. Satan works with intensity of purpose to induce our people to invest their time and money in gratifying supposed wants. This is a species of idolatry. . . .

"There were some who were striving for the mastery, each trying to excel the other in the swift running of their bicycles. There was a spirit of strife and contention among them as to which should be the greatest. The spirit was similar to that manifested in the baseball games on the college ground. Said my Guide: 'These things are an offense to God.' " --*Testimonies*, vol. 8, pp. 51, 52.

In 1899 Ellen White was in Sydney, Australia, when she encountered a huge crowd on one of the streets. "Hundreds and hundreds, and I might say thousands, were gathered together. 'What is the matter?' I asked. 'It is because of the cricket match,' was the answer. And while men were playing the game of cricket, and others were watching the game, Satan was playing the game of life for their souls.' " In *Australasian Union Conference Record*, July 26, 1899.

We're not just talking here about baseball or flagball or basketball. We're talking about a far more important game: the game of life. Our opponent is Satan, and only here may it truly be said, "Winning isn't every thing it's the only thing."