

SPORTS IN SEVENTH-DAY ACADEMIES AND COLLEGES

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The question of sports in Seventh-day Adventist schools frequently comes to the White Estate office from earnest Seventh-day Adventist teachers and students. We must look at the matter from the standpoint of the large principles involved. Ellen White lays down a basic principle to this study in the book Education. The opening paragraph of the chapter on "Recreation" reads:

"There is a distinction between recreation and amusement. Recreation, when true to its name, re-creation, tends to strengthen and build up. Calling us aside from our ordinary cares and occupations, it affords refreshment for mind and body, and thus enables us to return with new vigor to the earnest work of life. Amusement, on the other hand, is sought for the sake of pleasure, and is often carried to excess; it absorbs the energies that are required for useful work, and thus proves a hindrance to life's true success."--Education, p. 207.

This is in full harmony with counsel written in 1868, as found in the first volume of the Testimonies for the Church. The chapter entitled "Recreation for Christians" opens with the words:

"I was shown that Sabbathkeepers as a people labor too hard without allowing themselves change or periods of rest. Recreation is needful to those who are engaged in physical labor and is still more essential for those whose labor is principally mental. It is not essential to our salvation, nor for the glory of God, to keep the mind laboring constantly and excessively, even upon religious themes."--Testimonies, vol. 1, p. 514.

In introducing the subject of recreation, Sister White makes it very clear that it is the duty of Christians to arrange for proper recreation. In her basic article on the subject of education, written in 1872 and appearing in Testimonies for the Church, vol. 3, pages 131-160, she makes it very clear that the Seventh-day Adventist school program should be quite well divided between mental and physical activities. There were three reasons for this. The physical activity would lead to strong physical development, which is essential. It would be the means of preparing young people for the practical things of life, as they should engage in various industries or trades in connection with the school program. And it would also be the means of guarding against immorality, for a constant study program without adequate physical exercise laid the foundations for immoral practices.

Thus the church at an early date had the ideal set before it--an educational program well divided between mental and physical activity, to be followed in all of our schools.

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It was a great disappointment to Ellen White to learn that the brethren chose a small site in the city of Battle Creek for our first college. The vision given to her was of a school in the country with industry and agriculture, a school away from the diversions and temptations of the city life, a school where the practical side of education would be fostered and encouraged. From such a place young people would come forth prepared for life in a world going down in doom, and prepared for service in heralding the message of Jesus' coming again. She broke down and wept when she took in the situation at Battle Creek, with a college right in town.

As the sports program developed in the schools of the world, it developed in our college in Battle Creek. We had our football teams, our baseball teams, our basketball teams. There was even some boxing. Seventh-day Adventist youth with their background of healthful living and with their lives free from alcohol and tobacco were able to perform well. But it was not long until the games with other teams of the town, and the teams of other towns, led to great excitement. The interests of a large part of the student body began to diverge from the objective of making every effort count toward an adequate preparation for service, to the cultivation of excitement and pleasure. Had this program continued without being checked by messages from the Lord, our educational program would have been largely offset by the sports program which was beginning to make its way among us.

It was in this setting that Ellen White began to sound the warning, in which she mentioned certain games specifically. She mentioned football, baseball, and boxing. One such message written to the president of Battle Creek College in early 1893 deals with the situation. Revival meetings had been held, at which time the Spirit of the Lord was poured out in a special way. Mrs. White wrote in this letter:

"When the students at the school went into their match games and football playing, when they became absorbed in the amusement question, Satan saw it a good time to step in and make of none effect the Holy Spirit of God in molding and using the human subject. Had the teachers to a man done their duty, had they realized their accountability, had they stood in moral independence before God, had they used the ability which God had given them according to the sanctification of the spirit through the love of the truth, they would have had spiritual strength and divine enlightenment to press on and on and upward on the ladder of progress reaching heavenward. The fact is evident that they did not appreciate or walk in the light or follow the Light of the world.

"It is an easy matter to idle away, talk and play away, the Holy Spirit's influence. To walk in the light is to keep moving onward in the direction of light. If the one blessed becomes negligent and inattentive and does not watch unto prayer, if he does not lift the cross and bear the yoke of Christ, if his love of amusements and strivings for the mastery absorb his power or ability, then God is not made the first and best and last in everything, and Satan comes in to act his part in playing the game of life for his soul. He can play much more earnestly than they can play, and make deep-laid plots for the ruin of the soul."
--Selected Messages, book 1, p. 131.

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At just about this time a medical student in Michigan wrote to Sister White in Australia, inquiring about a number of points. In her letter of response, Sister White took up the question of sports in Battle Creek College. As she did so she laid out clearly the principles involved. I appreciate this statement very much because it helps us to see the real reasons for certain counsels which have been given. You will find a portion of this communication, dealing with the essential features, in The Adventist Home. Because of its vital bearings on the subject we quote it here:

"I do not condemn the simple exercise of playing ball; 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 that are perishing out of Christ. The amusements and expenditures of means for self-pleasing, which lead on step by step to self-glorifying, and the educating in these games for pleasure produce a love and passion for such things that is not favorable to the perfection of Christian character.

"The way that they have been conducted at the college does not bear the impress of heaven. It does not strengthen the intellect. It does not refine and purify the character. 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. In the place of the intellect becoming strengthened to do better work as students, to be better qualified as Christians to perform the Christian duties, the exercise in these games is filling their brains with thoughts that distract the mind from their studies. . . .

"Is the eye single to the glory of God in these games? I know that this is not so. There is a losing sight of God's way and His purpose. The employment of intelligent beings, in probationary time, is superseding God's revealed will and substituting for it the speculations and inventions of the human agent, with Satan by his side to imbue with his spirit. . . . The Lord God of heaven protests against the burning passion cultivated for supremacy in the games that are so engrossing."--The Adventist Home, pp. 499-500.

Sister White's statement in which she says, "I do not condemn the simple exercise of playing ball," should be carefully noted. In other words, there was nothing inherently wrong in playing a game in which a ball was used.

But after making this statement she lays out the perils in the sports program. She writes of the expenditure of time and money which is out of proportion, the glorification of the players, and the encouragement of the love of pleasure, until it is written in the books of heaven that they are lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God.

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Mrs. White goes on to say, "The way that they have been conducted at the college does not bear the impress of heaven."--Adventist Home, p. 499. I think this sentence tells a good deal. She is writing, of course, about amusements and games at Battle Creek College.

There is no question but what recreation is essential, but as Ellen White saw it, as young people grew older, this recreation could be found in some useful occupation which left something worth while in its wake. There were lines of missionary activities which would prove to be true recreation. This is the ideal which is set before us.

"There are healthful methods of exercise that may be planned which will be beneficial to both soul and body. There is a great work to be done and it is essential that every responsible agent shall educate himself to do this work acceptably to God. There is much for all to learn, and there can not be invented a better use for brain, bone, and muscle, than to accept the wisdom of God in doing good, and adopting some device for remedying the existing evils of this profligate, extravagant age.

"It is our duty, ever to seek to do good in the use of the muscles and brain God has given to youth, that they may be useful to others, making their labors lighter, soothing the sorrowing, lifting up the discouraged, speaking words of comfort to the hopeless, turning the minds of the students from fun and frolic which often carries them beyond the dignity of manhood and womanhood to shame and disgrace. The Lord would have the mind elevated, seeking higher, nobler channels of usefulness."--Notebook Leaflets, volume 1, No. 30.

It is evident that the Ellen G. White emphasis is on useful labor. This is one of the reasons our schools are located in the country, where there is opportunity for industries and agriculture. This was one of the motivating factors in the establishment of our college in Cooranbong, Australia, some seventy-five miles north of the city of Sydney. Sister White took a very active part in the establishment of this school. While she was there assisting in this work, many visions were given to her, opening up more fully the principles which should govern us in the operation of our colleges.

The Experience at Avondale

It was in the setting of the newly established Avondale school that considerable counsel was given on the question of sports. You will find this in Counsels to Teachers, pages 348-354. Here again the entire article should be read carefully to see the underlying principles. Australia is a sports-loving land. We may think that America is sports mad, but this situation is very much more intensified in Australia. There are three thousand tennis courts in the city of Sydney. When Mark Twain visited Australia and observed the people's love of sports, he exclaimed, "Restful Australia, where every day is a holiday, and when there is not a holiday, there is a horse race."

This perhaps helps us in a sense to see the extent to which the Australians have gone into sports. Ellen White saw clearly that if Seventh-day Adventists were to accomplish the work which they must accomplish, our schools should be far from the cities where the many holidays would make less impact, where they would be away from the excitement of the sports program and the racing.

Our college was located in the country, on a tract of fifteen hundred acres of land. In the early days of the work, we were putting up our buildings. There was ample opportunity for all of the student labor which was available. It was difficult to find help to accomplish all that should be done in the building and on the farm. A large part of the students came from families of limited financial resources. It was with great difficulty that they were able to get together enough money to keep the school going, and to keep the young folks on the campus when their parents had very little to send in the way of financial support. A good spirit existed at the school. The various lines of employment offered by the school gave ample recreation to the young people. There was a program of study and work.

Ellen White felt that with the Lord's blessing they had succeeded in separating the young people from the allurements and distractions of the world. Speaking of it in the union conference session in 1899, she said:

"We desire to take the students away from the foul atmosphere of the city. Not that Satan is not here. He is here, but we are trying to do all we can to place the students in the very best circumstances, in order that they may fasten their eyes on Christ. In the country they are not near the temptation of horse-racing and cricket matches. Once in Sydney I saw a great multitude 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. Therefore we decided to locate our school where the students would not see cricket matches or horse races. We are just where God wants us to be, and many conversions have taken place in this school."--Australasian Union Conference Record, July 26, 1899.

But there came a day not many months later, when, in 1900, they were to have a holiday and without giving due consideration to the far-reaching effects of certain activities, the faculty of the school, largely workers from America, planned that, following a morning convocation at which Sister White would speak to the students, the afternoon would be spent in games. Money had been collected by some of the students to buy some sports equipment, and the afternoon program blossomed out with activities and games. Some of these games were of a character to create in the hearts of these young people the love of pleasure and an engrossment in sports. It was in these circumstances that the counsel was given that is found today in Counsels to Teachers, pages 348-354.

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This counsel has led some to feel that it was sinful to engage in any games, especially games in which a ball was used. A careful reading of Sister White's statement in the light of the principles set forth in the letter to the young man, as presented in The Adventist Home, makes it clear that that is not the point. The point at issue is something larger and deeper and more far-reaching: the encouragement of the love of pleasure, which so easily displaces the love of God. It is the engaging in activities which in themselves may be innocent but may in their infatuations develop into idolatry.

In the light of these principles, I see very clearly a distinct difference between a day of recreation at which certain games may be played, and the development of well trained teams in our academies or colleges to engage in a sports program. When a group of Christian young people, or the members of a church or an institutional family, gather for a day of recreation, they may play certain games. There is no long training period and no large outlay of means. A few hours are spent together, the games are over, and the day has been one of recreation. How different this is from a program where the young people may be called upon to spend hours in training day after day, where there are certain players who are glorified, and in the development of teams excitement runs high, competition is keen, and a few young people get the exercise while the others stand by and shout. This is not true recreation. The difference is obvious.

Now we come to the question of intercollegiate sports. When the sports teams of one college play the sports teams of another college, the problems which may arise in a limited way in an institution become greatly intensified. The great theme of interest for weeks in advance is the particular game that is to be played. The theme of conversation and interest following the game is the game that has been played. This brings in an excitement and a love of pleasure which lifts our young people clear out and away from the serious world which is going down in doom. It is for this reason that intercollegiate sports have not been encouraged in our Seventh-day Adventist institutions. As we examine the fruits which these activities yield, we find that they do not measure up to that which we know in our own hearts is best and that which is set before us in the Spirit of Prophecy as best.

I talked with one of our physicians last year in West Australia, who was a young man in school at the time of this experience in Australia. He told me that in the light of Sister White's counsel he and another young man banded together to study what they could accomplish in helping others about them. They found that there were many things that they could do which provided recreation and which provided that soul-warming experience of Christian service. In just a short time they sensed the value of Sister White's counsels pointing out the advantage of finding recreation in activities which bring strength to the character as well as to the body.

I realize that as our colleges grow, it is more difficult to meet God's ideal of a program of work and study. It is more difficult for the young people to find activities which bring a remuneration on the school campus. But would there not still be many activities which would accomplish something worth while for the over-all benefit of the student body and the school, even though there might not be financial remuneration?

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I recognize the place of the gymnasium on the school campus, as did Ellen White. She points out, "Gymnastic exercises fill a useful place in many schools," [Education, page 210] but she goes on to stress the more wholesome and over-all beneficial recreation found in useful labor. Should we not ever strive for this? When we do engage in the various games on the campus or in the gymnasium, should we not ever strive to make the activity one which is purely recreation, one which will not detract from our spiritual experience or our mental attainments in the school?

Let our young people ask themselves these questions: Why do we attend a Christian academy or college? What are our objectives? Are all of our activities contributing toward these objectives? I feel confident that our students will experience rich blessings from the Lord as they look at this matter from the standpoint of basic principles.

Those who wish to study further Ellen G. White's statements regarding recreation will find interesting material in the following books: Education, pages 207-222; Counsels to Teachers, Parents, and Students, pp. 321-354; and Testimonies for the Church, Vol. 1, pages 514-520. An entire section is devoted to recreation in The Adventist Home, pp. 493-530, showing us clearly the principles involved.

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