

BACK PAGES

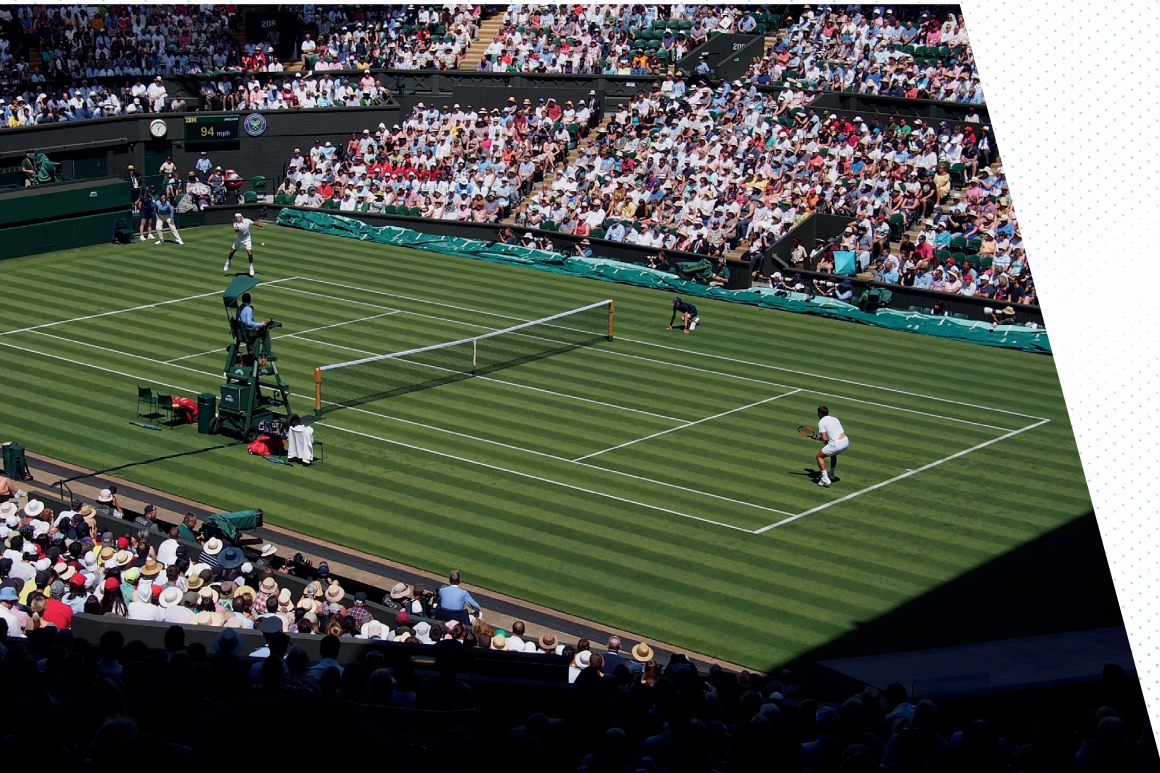
WHAT'S INSIDE

TAKING THE GOSPEL ON TOUR

HOW CAN YOU GLORIFY GOD IN
SPORT?

A TALE OF TWO CITIES

STANDING OUT ON THE SIDELINES



CHRISTIANS IN SPORT

CONTACT

Frampton House
Unit D1
Telford Road Industrial Estate
Bicester
OX26 4LD

01869 255 630
info@christiansinsport.org.uk
www.christiansinsport.org.uk

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CHRISTIANS IN SPORT IS A MOVEMENT OF COMPETITORS, COACHES AND OFFICIALS.

WE EXIST TO REACH THE WORLD OF SPORT FOR CHRIST.

My first contact with Christians in Sport was as a student and elite athlete. It was a pivotal moment for me as a Christian sports person as I began to understand that sport can be worship, as well as being a rich mission field.

Some years later a friend rang me for advice, he wanted to know if pursuing a career as an elite athlete was really worth it as a Christian. My advice to him? Enjoy this chance to make the most of your God-given athletic talent and trust Him on this thrilling journey as opportunities come to share Jesus with other sportspeople.

As I reflect on the stories told in this magazine, it's a joy to see God working in the lives of many sportspeople; from pro athletes to young people, from international, to local leaders. Our vision is bold, yet every statistic, every event, involves real people, with real stories of God's work in their lives.

I hope you are just as excited as I am to see God at work in the world of sport in the weeks and months to come. We remain thankful to God for your partnership as it sustains our mission to reach every sports person with the good news of Jesus.

BRIAN GLYNN

Back Pages Editor



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DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE

WORKING TO REACH EVERY SPORTSPERSON

In recent magazines, we've led with a theological reflection on the culture of sport and the relationship between the Christian faith and engaging with this culture. It is essential to reflect on this relationship since our thinking informs our day-to-day practices in reaching the world of sport for Christ.

And yet our primary focus has been and always will be, making disciples of Jesus in the world of sport. In the spring, we launched a new fundraising campaign titled 'Help every sportsperson hear about Jesus', a title that cuts to the core of our vision as we recognise our evangelistic activity remains critical.

This magazine focuses on practical stories from across the work of Christians in Sport as our staff have been about their business as evangelists in partnership with competitive sportspeople from amateur right up to the top-level of sport.



This focus is reinforced by the recent 'Talking Jesus' report [2022]*, which indicated that just 6% of the UK adult population are practising Christians. Crucially, 54% of these Christians didn't feel they knew anyone who wasn't a Christian well enough to talk to them about Jesus.

Furthermore, 40% of Christians fail to speak with people they know are not Christians since they feel incapable of answering difficult questions about the Christian faith.

Despite these stark statistics, 15% of the Christians interviewed came to faith directly from conversations with Christian friends. Around nine million people play competitive sport weekly in a community with ample opportunity to build genuine and deep friendships. Christians must be involved in this world to make sure every sportsperson has the opportunity to know a Christian and hear the good news of Jesus. At Christians in Sport, we are delighted to support Christian sportspeople through training and resources



*read the full report at talkingjesus.org

that can equip them to share their faith with sports friends.

We do this across several contexts, and in this magazine, you can read stories of how this plays out.

This year, we have supported over 300 elite athletes across various sports in contexts where doors are hard to open, and trust is difficult to gain.

Through supporting weekly group meetings at universities and termly gatherings of local, amateur sportspeople in towns and cities across the UK, we've worked to equip many hundreds of sportspeople to share their faith through personal relationships and at evangelistic events.

Alongside our multi-faceted adult work, this summer



over 700 young people supported by hundreds of leaders will attend our Sports Plus camps. For many, this is a rare opportunity to hear and respond to the good news of Jesus.

Returning to the 'Talking Jesus' report, when asked where they go to learn about Christianity, the most popular response was Google Search [26%] and YouTube [10%]. This is why, alongside front-line staff, our digital team produces articles, videos and podcasts that enable sportspeople to search for relevant resources explaining the good news of Jesus. Last year, this content was seen in some form online over 3.5 million times. Every month, thousands of people listen to our podcast and receive our pre-match devotional, Game Day.

Around nine million people play competitive sports in the UK each week. Yet very few are practising Christians, and we long for every sportsperson to hear and respond to the good news about Jesus. We continue to depend on God's guidance and provision for this mission. We thank God for your generous support in prayer and financial giving that enables this to happen. Thank you.



In the UK around 9 million people play competitive sport every week*, yet very few are practising Christians. We long for every sportsperson to hear about Jesus. We continue to depend on God's guidance and provision for this mission and we continue to thank God for your support and generosity. Without your support we could not do what we do. Thank you.

GRAHAM DANIELS

Graham is the General Director of Christians in Sport. He is also a director of Cambridge United FC and an associate staff member at St Andrew the Great church in Cambridge.



*Data modelled from Sport England Active Lives Survey 2018

LIFE ON TOUR



CASPER RUUD STANDS MOTIONLESS, "HOW LONG?" "30 SECONDS CASPER." NEXT TO HIM RAFAEL NADAL SPRINTS FURIOUSLY UP AND DOWN AS THEY WAIT TO BE CALLED ON COURT FOR THE FINAL OF THE 2022 FRENCH OPEN.

Watching this scene from Netflix documentary 'Break Point' you can feel the tension, the nervous energy, the pressure both players are under to perform. It's a brilliant insight into the thrilling lives of tour sport athletes, which are just as dramatic behind the scenes as they are on the court, golf course, or racetrack.

Drive to Survive, *Full Swing* and *Break Point*, all document the lives of individuals performing at the highest level. A different country every weekend, massive highs and crushing lows; it's a pressure cooker that creates some of the most exciting competition you can watch.

Competing at this level is undoubtedly a privilege, it's many a sportsperson's dream. A handful of these athletes do achieve fame, extreme wealth and lasting legacy, and yet these documentaries are so fascinating because they humanise the super-humans we perceive top sportspeople to be. They expose insecurities, doubts and fears; ultimately, they help us see that this people group needs the to hear gospel just as much as any other.

Here is what we've learned from years of walking alongside Christian world tour athletes, and how we've worked to reach this community with good news of Jesus.

PRESSURE

First of all, the pressure these athletes face is immense, it's a performance driven culture.

A Christian player reflected: "Week to week you're walking around with your ranking plastered on your face, everyone is asking 'who did you beat or lose to last week to get there?'"

Studying the Bible 1-2-1 or in small groups is a wonderful antidote to the pressure players feel to find their identity in what they achieve. We've been able to be there for athletes as they've finished races, reminding them of Biblical truth as they process victory or defeat, pointing them to Christ's victory over death, and the lasting secure identity that can be found there.



"IF YOUR TEAM MATE WINS AND YOU ARE SECOND, IT FEELS LIKE YOU'VE LOST"

Valtteri Bottas

"WHEN I'M OKAY, I FEEL AT HOME ON COURT AND I FEEL LIKE THIS IS MY PLACE, BUT I GO FROM THAT TO - GET ME OUT OF HERE, I WANT TO DIE."

Paula Badosa

"I STARTED AT AGE SEVEN, WE IDENTIFY OURSELVES AS A SPORTS PERSON AND WE KIND OF FORGET ABOUT THE HUMAN BEING"

Bianca Andreescu



ISOLATION

For many trying to make it there's a good number of seasons/years doing everything almost alone. A top 50 ranked tennis player said this on a recent podcast:

"I turned pro at 17 and didn't go to college like my friends, I had to grow up and become independent much more quickly. I was training away from home, booking flights, travelling alone. The majority of your time is spent in airports, hotels, competing, or training in unfamiliar places. It's hard to find a place to feel comfortable, you miss your home, your church."

Isolation is a reality for lots of players. Some at the very top can afford to bring friends and family around the world with them, but the majority cannot, or feel that bringing them will add to the pressure to perform.

As we walk alongside athletes, we can be a familiar face where there are few. Moreover, our relationships with these athletes don't depend on their performance, which is rare and precious at this level. We are uniquely placed to be impartial, to point to the unconditional love Jesus has for them when they feel isolated from family, home, or church.

RELENTLESSNESS

The pressure and isolation are only enhanced by its relentlessness. Tour sports have long seasons, playing in a new country week after week. Success at an event only lasts a matter of days till the next one, and after every result there are media and sponsor commitments that need to be fulfilled.

This is fundamentally why tour athletes are such a hard people group to reach with the good news of Jesus. It's a week-to-week global schedule, and it can be punishing. Finding time to meet online when athletes are competing across multiple time zones, or the scheduling of a knockout tournament means there's barely a minute in a day when all the players are free.

Yet when we arrive at major events and get a chance to meet face to face, it often opens up gospel opportunities. Tour sports communities are so tight knit that our staff can become recognised, and gain trust as they spend time embedded within these communities.

Our prayer is always that God would open a door for the message of Jesus as we travel to events or invite to an online study, and there is often fruit among the frustration.



TAKING THE GOSPEL ON TOUR

Within the landscape of elite sport there are just a handful of truly global individual tour sports that require athletes to compete across multiple continents every year. Athletics, golf and tennis are three of the most established.

Last year we ran 57 group Bible studies and over 100 1-2-1s across these three sports. We exist to reach every sportsperson with the gospel. As an organisation we are uniquely placed to take the good news of Jesus to this elite sports tribe, and equipped to share Jesus those who may rarely, if ever, come in to contact with Christians. Please pray that God would sustain this work of reaching tour athletes with the gospel, and encouraging Christian athletes as they face the relentless pressure to perform that comes with competing at this level.

BRIAN GLYNN

Brian is the editor for Back Pages. He runs for Team Bath Athletic Club and attends St. Bart's Riverside in Bath.



"THE BEST PLUS ABOUT MISSING THE CUT IS YOU'RE GOING HOME TO THE FAMILY; YOU JUST DON'T WANT TO MISS THE CUT THOUGH. IT'S LIKE, YOUR JOB IS NOT TO WASTE TIME, BE AWAY FROM THEM FOR FIVE DAYS AND NOT COVER YOUR EXPENSES. IT'S LIKE THE ULTIMATE WORST FEELING YOU CAN POSSIBLY HAVE AS A GOLFER. IT'S THE WORST FEELING."

Ian Poulter

"IT'S TOUGH TO BE HAPPY IN TENNIS BECAUSE EVERY SINGLE WEEK EVERYONE LOSES APART FROM ONE PERSON."

Taylor Fritz

"IN FORMULA ONE, YOU CAN BE THE HERO TODAY, BUT MAYBE THE FORGOTTEN ONE TOMORROW"

Daniel Ricciardo

"WHEN I STARTED LOSING, I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT WAS HAPPENING IN A WAY... I WAS SHOCKED, WHICH WAS REALLY WEIRD BECAUSE PEOPLE ARE LOSING EVERY SINGLE WEEK IN TENNIS"

Bianca Andreescu

**All quotes taken from Netflix documentaries and recent press interviews*

MEET THE COACH DRIVING WOMEN'S SPORTS MINISTRY IN INDIA



A GLOBAL TEAM TO TAKE THE GOSPEL TO EVERY SPORTSPERSON

In 2009 a small team from Christians in Sport travelled to Chennai, India to join with the Christian Sports Fellowship (CSF), a local Christian sports ministry. They visited a school coaching sport and sharing the gospel with the students. One of those students, a young Hindu volleyball player, is amazingly now deeply involved in the world of reaching sportspeople in India with the gospel. This is her story.

Reaching every sportsperson with the good news of Jesus is an exciting vision and it requires, under God, a truly global team effort. Since the very beginning of Christians in Sport, this has been our vision, with a focus on sports ministry in the UK, but also overseas in partnership with other sports ministries across the world.

In 2021 the Level 3 leadership development programme launched with the aim of providing consistent training to sustain and grow the work of reaching sportspeople across the globe with the good news of Jesus.

The course is designed specifically with the aim of enabling individuals to learn together as part of an international cohort and take that learning into their specific context to build sustainable sports ministry.

REACHING EVERY SPORTSPERSON

Among this year's Level 3 participants is Namratha (right) from India. In 2009 Namratha was just starting to develop a passion for volleyball in her final year at school in Chennai, a sport in which she'd go on to play professionally in India. It was through this passion that she'd discover Jesus.

"The coaches would pray before and after training and matches, this was completely new for me. I'm not from a Christian home, my Dad was agnostic and I'd say my mum was an atheist. But I started to question things of faith a lot, I spent a lot of time searching before accepting Jesus in 2014."

DRIVING WOMEN'S SPORTS MINISTRY IN INDIA

Fast forward to 2023 and Namratha continues to be actively involved in sport as a volleyball player and coach in the state of Kerala. She's heavily involved in sports ministry in India and has a particular heart for women's sport.

"I live in Kerala, which is a sport mad state, people here really love sport so much more than in Chennai where I'm from. They really understand what it means to be competitive, there's real opportunity for sports ministry to be effective here."

"However, even here, women's sport is challenging, as it is more generally in India; there's a lot of pressure on women to prioritise academic learning and then marriage. Parents are generally very supportive when it



WHAT IS THE LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME?

Level 1: Three short sessions to help Christians connect sport and faith.

Level 2: A 12 week programme for local leaders in competitive sport ministry.

Level 3: A year long programme for leaders in competitive sports ministry at a regional or national level.

comes to education and marriage, but sport is not often a consideration, or even actively discouraged. People are sceptical of women's sport, so it gets less attention, support and funding. I want to help change these perceptions and use this as an opportunity to show Jesus to women with a passion for sport."

LEARNING TOGETHER

This year's Level 3 cohort comprises of 30 individuals from 22 countries, each of them seeking to share Jesus with sportspeople within their specific culture. The goal of the programme is to bring these people together for teaching focused on applying theology to sport and for them to benefit from a shared learning experience that can be applies across contexts. Namratha reflects on the recent in-person Level 3 gathering in Malta:

"The focus of the conference was all about Christianity and competition. Opening the Bible with others to explore this was such a rich learning experience, you learn so much in the sessions, but you also absorb so much by just being there with other like-minded people, talking, listening, playing sport together."

LOOKING FORWARD

"There's so much I'm excited about with women's sports ministry in India. The pressure on women to stop sport all together when they get married or have children is really high, even on women playing sport at the top-level.

I want to help facilitate opportunities for these women, particularly Christians, to continue in sport, potentially as mentors to younger women coming up, or to record conversations that I can use with Christians I work with to ensure all that experience isn't lost.

It's so important for young women in sport to see these role models and feel empowered to live and speak for Jesus in their sporting context.

Later on this year we're running level 1 and 2 programmes for Christian sportspeople in India, which is really exciting to be able to deliver that training and encourage other Christians to reach sportspeople for Jesus."

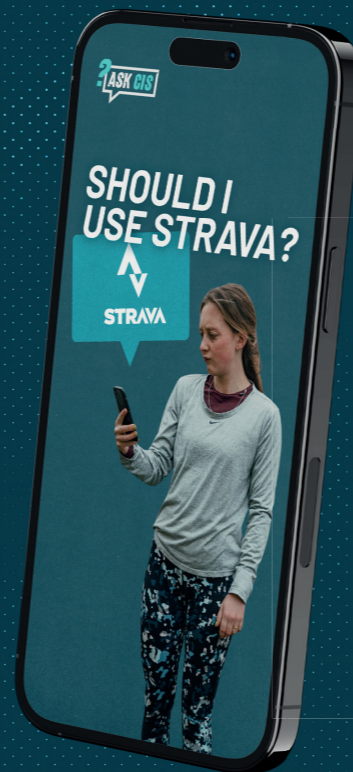
A TEAM TO REACH THE WORLD OF SPORT

As this year's Level 3 programme continues over the next few months, Namratha, and many leaders like her will continue to learn alongside each other through online training and meeting together, in-person, at the end of the programme in September. Our hope, alongside our international partners, is that participants will go back to their countries feeling taught, connected and supported to sustain faithful sports ministries that enable every sportsperson across the world to hear the good news of Jesus.

PRAY FOR THIS YEAR'S LEVEL 3 COHORT AS CHRISTIANS IN SPORT WORK ALONGSIDE OTHER ORGANISATIONS TO DELIVER EFFECTIVE TRAINING TO ENABLE SUSTAINABLE MINISTRIES TO GROW ACROSS THE WORLD.

THE ACADEMY

The Academy is our new digital platform dedicated to equipping you to **live and speak for Jesus** in the world of student sport.



VIDEOS



PODCASTS



BLOGS



& MORE!



CHRISTIANSINSPORT.ORG.UK/ACADEMY

HOW CAN I GLORIFY GOD IN MY SPORT?



"I PLAY FOR GOD'S GLORY."

It's common to read or hear something like this on social media or in a post-match interview, sportspeople often speak about doing something for God's glory and giving Him thanks after a match.

But what do they actually mean? What is God's glory? How can we do anything for the glory of God?

GOD'S GOAL IS TO SHOW OFF HIS GLORY

The universe, the heavens, the sea and the skies are all about God and made for Him and they all declare His glory (Psalm 19:1).

Pastor John Piper summed this up saying:

"God's ultimate goal is to preserve and display his infinite and awesome greatness and worth, that is, His glory."

The world, and us, were made to show off the magnificence of God. All of us were made in the image of God to reflect and represent the God who made us. So, we can say it is a good and right thing to think about how we can glorify God in our sport, that is how we were made to be.

BUT WE GET IT WRONG

We pridefully glorify ourselves instead of pointing people to Jesus or we robotically respond to questions with "all glory be to God" when we win or play well, yet forget to when we

lose, or even feel that God is only glorified when we win!

We cannot add to God's glory by performing to a certain standard or doing something incredible. God is complete and perfect and needs nothing from us. But we can point to His glory, that is His worth.

Here are two things to think about:

1. WE GLORIFY GOD BY ENJOYING HIM AS WE COMPETE

The Westminster Shorter Catechism begins by saying:

"The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever."

We glorify God primarily by enjoying him, or "delighting in the Lord" (Psalm 37:4) which itself brings joy, which is what we



were made for. It's a wonderful loop! We were made to be happy, and we find this in enjoying God which is glorifying him.

Just as a doctor and a patient both find joy when the sick patient is cured, so God is happy when we wholeheartedly enjoy Him and His good gifts - including sport.

John Piper summed this up saying: "God is most glorified, when we are most satisfied in Him."

This means satisfaction is found in what He is sovereignly doing in our lives, both what we think is good and what we struggle to understand. God is not just glorified when we win or get everything right. God uses sport to make us more like Himself, in both the highs and the lows, the victory and the pain. We can glorify God as we recognise Him doing this in our sport and be thankful for what He is doing in us. A heart of thanksgiving is key as we seek to glorify Him.

2. WE GLORIFY GOD BY DECLARING HIS GREATNESS

Jesus says in Matthew 5:16:

"Let your light so shine among men that they may see your good deeds and give glory to your Father in heaven."

"WE GLORIFY GOD IN OUR SPORT BY DELIGHTING IN HIM AND DISPLAYING HIS INFINITE WORTH AND BEAUTY TO THOSE WE PLAY WITH IN WHAT WE DO AND SAY."

As we enjoy God and His good gifts, this will lead to good deeds. We will love and serve those we compete with and against in how we play as well as how we speak of God's magnificence. For pointing people towards the one who gives everlasting joy is the most loving thing we can do!

Whilst sport does not just have value because of the opportunities it brings to build friendships and share our faith, evangelism is one way in which we can bring God glory as we live out our new identity as saved people, enjoying all He has given us.

So - how can I glorify God in my sport? Our whole lives are to be lived for His glory by living with total joy and freedom as we shout through all that we do and all that we say that the God we worship is glorious! Go and enjoy Him in your sport.

JONNY REID

Jonny is Christians in Sport's Head of Resources. He plays cricket for Cumnor CC and is one of the leaders of Town Church, Bicester.



KATY'S STORY

A STUDENT'S LIFE CHANGED FOREVER

STUDENT MINISTRY

Student ministry has long been part of the work of Christians in Sport. Many universities have rich sporting cultures and this, combined with the academic values of critical thinking and exploring new ideas, creates a brilliant sporting context within which to share the good news of Jesus.

University years are formative, it's where many first hear about Jesus, or personally commit to living lives in service of Christ. Katy is one such person who became a Christian at university through the witness of a Christian teammate in the late 90s.

Katy came to faith through the student work of Christians in Sport nearly 30 years ago and, whilst our tactics may have changed, the main way God has continued to work has remained.

SHARING FAITH

University sport is a really exciting prospect for many young people like Katy. It's the closest many get to being pro athletes, even if their level isn't elite, living and breathing sport alongside others who love sport brings a taste of that lifestyle.

"I went to university and was very focused on being a netball player. I played a lot of netball there got to meet some fantastic girls in the netball club and they became probably my closest friends when I was at university. There were a couple of Christians in the team. I'd never met sporty Christians before so I was quite attracted to them and found them really interesting to talk to and I began to have really great conversations with one of them in particular."

It's a wonderful context to develop strong bonds of friendship, and it's also an environment in which followers of Jesus can easily be distinctive, just as Katy's netball friends were. It's a great joy for us to see Christian students developing these close friendships within their sports teams and sharing their faith.

To support them to do this, we help university groups to run evangelistic events. These take the shape of events like The Sports Quiz or a sports tournament with a half time talk as well as supporting individuals to host dialogue dinners – inviting friends round for a meal to hear a gospel message and discuss the Christian faith together. This year over 900 students have been guests at evangelistic events in universities across the UK, including multiple dialogue dinners that have enabled students to share their testimonies openly in their sports teams.



EQUIPPING STUDENTS

"My friend had committed to praying for six of us in the squad at the university Christians in sport prayer meeting. I started going to church with her and I actually started going to the Christians in Sport prayer meeting with them. At the end of the Christmas term of my second year, they said you should go to the Christians in Sport student conference; I never thought I'd end up at a Christian conference but I ended up going along. Amazingly, I remember the first night the talk was on Romans 8:1, I can still remember sitting in that room and for the first time understanding what Jesus did when He died for us on the cross and being blown away and wanting to live the rest of my life for Jesus."

Pray, play, say - a framework based on Colossians 4:2-6 - has long been the mantra for university groups. We can see how that is playing out in Katy's story, and today we follow this same pattern as we work to equip students.

The aim is to help students connect sport and faith and equip them to live and speak for Jesus within the culture of university sport. We recognise that every student is at a different point on their journey with Jesus at university, some arrive with firm and grounded faith, and others are seeking or have yet to hear anything of the good news of Jesus.

This is done through weekly group meetings, led by students, 1-2-1 Bible studies led by our student staff team, and our annual student conference.

With this in mind, our aim for student groups and 1-2-1s is to bring to life the fundamental truths of the gospel and apply them directly to sport, encouraging

students to grow in their relationship with Jesus and equipping them to share their faith with their teammates.

This year 193 students attended our annual conference as it focussed on Romans 8 again, encouraging and equipping students to go into the world of sport sharing the glorious truth that there is now no condemnation in Christ Jesus. This truth has the power to save just as much today as it did when Katy was at universities in the 90s and will continue to until Christ returns!

RUNNING THE RACE TOGETHER

"My world view was completely changed. As I went back to university I got stuck into a church and continued to play netball, I captained in my final year and we saw loads of other girls in the team come to Faith which was a complete Joy."

This is what we long to see as we work to reach student sportspeople with the good news of Jesus, disciples of Jesus, making disciples in the world of student sport!

Our work with students has long followed the same pattern. We work to support student sportspeople to connect their sport and faith and together go into their university teams to share the good news of Jesus.

We continue to rely completely on God's grace to motivate student sportspeople to share the good news and on God alone to change the lives of people like Katy.

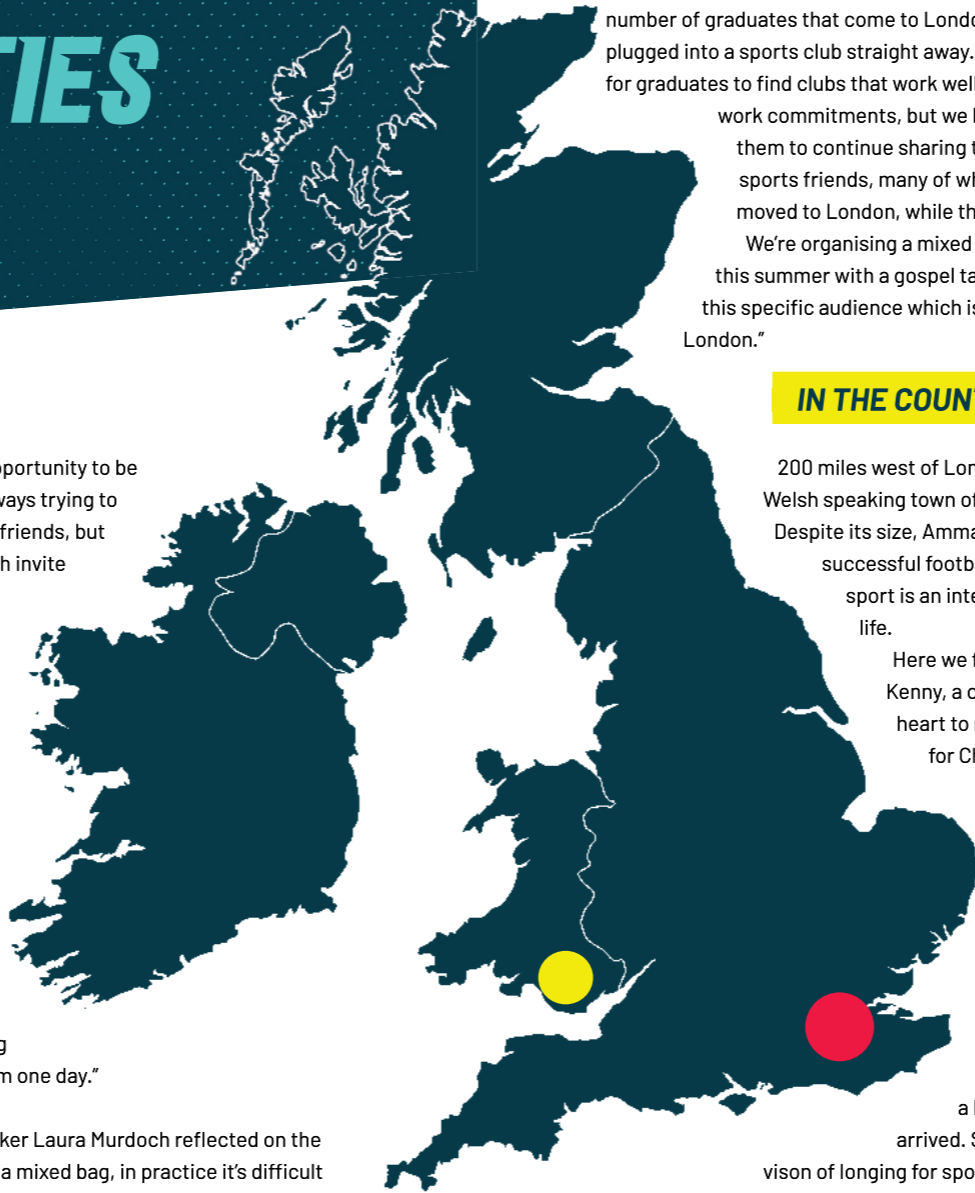
It's a privilege to see sportspeople discover Jesus and grow in their love for him at university, and a joy to see those who continue to be involved with Christians in Sport serving the world of sport faithfully long after they graduate. Katy's is one such story, and there are many others. Will you pray with us that God continues to use student ministry to help every sportsperson hear about Jesus?





LOCAL NETWORKS

A TALE OF TWO CITIES



In September 2022, Christians in Sport launched 50 local networks across the UK for adults involved in competitive sport. The vision was to connect sportspeople together and support them to take the good news to their clubs and teams.

So far we've witnessed this happening, over 1,000 sportspeople have been guests at evangelistic events, 104 gatherings have happened with 895 people attending to be encouraged and equipped, many of them new contacts to Christians in Sport.

These are small inroads, millions of adults regularly play sport in the UK and the reality is there are very few Christians in this world. Yet these numbers represent real people. Here's just two stories from two unique contexts within the landscape of sports ministry in the UK.

IN THE CITY

A local in London might seem like an oxymoron, however the annual influx of graduates and the presence of large influential churches help drive sports ministry in a way that's unique to London. It's in this context that we find Arnold from East London. He found out about the first London local network gathering when he saw a Christians in Sport advert social media, and jumped at the opportunity:

"I saw it as a great opportunity to be obedient to God, I'm always trying to share my faith with my friends, but church feels like a tough invite sometimes. At the network gathering we prayed for people we'd like to invite to the quiz later in the year and I prayed for three guys, it was a real encouragement to get over my fear and just invite them along. Of those three, two came along and heard a great talk about Jesus, I'm really praying that they'll embrace Him one day."

London regional worker Laura Murdoch reflected on the year gone by: "It's been a mixed bag, in practice it's difficult to gather people from across the city regularly, but we've had two brilliant quizzes packed with sportspeople involved

in local clubs and teams.

A significant challenge we face is engaging with the vast number of graduates that come to London but don't get plugged into a sports club straight away. It often takes time for graduates to find clubs that work well alongside their work commitments, but we long to encourage them to continue sharing the gospel with sports friends, many of whom will also have moved to London, while they settle in.

We're organising a mixed netball tournament this summer with a gospel talk to try and reach this specific audience which is quite unique to London."

IN THE COUNTRY

200 miles west of London, we find the Welsh speaking town of Ammanford.

Despite its size, Ammanford is home to a successful football and rugby club: sport is an integral part of local life.

Here we find a local pastor, Kenny, a crossfitter with a heart to reach sportspeople for Christ. He'd been praying for someone to take forward this vision, recognising that his church role could not be primarily devoted to sportspeople, when Gwennan, a keen weightlifter arrived. She shared this

vision of longing for sportspeople to hear about Jesus, speaking with our Welsh regional worker Lloyd Thomas and Kenny, she asked how she could get involved.

Last summer Gwennan served at Brecon Sports Plus for the first time, and then jumped at the opportunity to start a network in Ammanford when Lloyd shared the vision with her.

"The networks initiative came at exactly the right time for Ammanford. Gwennan was asking me how she could get involved in reaching local sportspeople for Jesus, and starting a network proved to be a great fit. Gwennan was able to get the Ammanford network up and running straight away in the Autumn after Sports Plus."

So far the Ammanford network has met each term to pray and share vision together, starting with just three sportspeople to begin with and growing each gathering. The group now has Christians from five sports clubs, as well as a retired Paralympian, and they hope to run an evangelistic barbeque with a gospel message for sportspeople in the summer. Lloyd said:

"The Ammanford network started small as we expected, but it's starting to grow, they've been investing in each other, identifying individuals and opportunities to connect with other Christians to maximise an evangelistic opportunity in the summer that can attract a bigger cross-section of the sporting community in Ammanford to come and hear the good news of Jesus."

THE FUTURE

As we review this first year of the local networks initiative, our vision going forward is to continue connecting sportspeople across towns and cities alongside the local church. Our vision remains to reach sportspeople, that exist on our doorstep, with the good news of Jesus.

GET CONNECTED IN YOUR TOWN OR CITY - VISIT CHRISTIANSINSPORT.ORG.UK/LOCAL

THE ROWER WHO RETIRED BEFORE THE OLYMPICS



Anastasia Posner (née Chitty) represented Oxford University in five Boat Race crews as well as representing Great Britain at World Cups, World Championships and the World University Games.

Anastasia became a Christian whilst studying at Oxford, growing in her faith as she progressed through her rowing career.

In 2020 Anastasia retired from rowing to complete her medical studies, giving up her opportunity to compete for a spot in the British Olympic team for the postponed Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games.

Danno chatted to Anastasia for the Christians in Sport Podcast at her rowing club to talk about her journey to faith and what it looked like to live as a Christian at the top-level of rowing.



You went on to join the British team, pausing your medical studies and focussing on rowing. What were the challenges to your faith in this period?

The pressure to perform was relentless, whether it's competing with teammates for selection or in the races themselves, there was no let up.

As a Christian it was tough, particularly because I knew my identity wasn't in rowing! If you're pursuing being the best in the world and you're trying to get to the Olympics, you almost have to tell yourself it's everything, because it demands so much of you and you have to make so many sacrifices and you have to be so selfish.

I found it hard to wrestle with the desire to use my body and the gifts that He's given me to glorify Him, but for it not to become all-consuming. Often I thought: do I need to do this? It made it harder for me to be single minded because as Christians we're not called to be selfishly single minded.

I was fortunate to have a Christian teammate and, before races we'd reflect and say: God's given us everything we need to fulfil His Word today.

That didn't take away any of the competitive nature. We wanted to squeeze every bit of talent out of us that He's given. But we knew we didn't need more than He's given us. It gave us real freedom to compete hard.

What did witness look like as an elite athlete?

My witness often wasn't because people saw something of Christ in me, sadly. I was more witnessing when I could share that Christ was the answer to my brokenness!

The constant tiredness was central to why it was so hard I think. I was so aware of my sin at times. I could easily say the wrong thing and I could be nasty and I could upset people because it was so intense and competitive, and yet the Lord still used that.

It gave me opportunities to acknowledge my sin and my brokenness and the hurt that it could cause at times, and to point others to the forgiveness I found in Jesus. Even

though that was really hard to do.

And, at each stage of my career, I can think of someone who the Lord used to teach me so much. And God used me to encourage a few Christian rowers back into church, to get them on fire again for their faith when it had grown cold. That was a real privilege and so special.

What was your relationship with Christians in Sport like during your career?

I think at some point when I was training for The Boat Race at university, I turned up at church crying, and the student worker said 'this girl needs Christians in Sport.' She put me in touch with Debbie, who rowed in two Olympics, and we started meeting when I was still a student and doing U23 GB races.

It was just helpful knowing someone who gets it, because actually the intensity of the world of elite sport, is absolutely relentless.

People often don't get it in the church, but Debbie really did get it. She knew the trials I was going through and could still point me back to Jesus and not belittle things.

She understood injury and selection pressure and strained competitive relationships, we could pray about it and she'd always point me to Jesus.

I struggled at church being known as 'the rower' when, as a Christian, I was being told that my identity wasn't in rowing. People would always ask me about rowing and it was often frustrating, to be honest!

Rowing was my normal life at the time, it wasn't special or exciting for me to talk about it all the time, even if it was for other people. But Debbie knew what that was like, it was refreshing, for her to be there and to be able to talk normally, it really helped me through the real challenges I faced.

How tough was it to give up on the dream of going to the Olympics after working towards that goal for four years of your life?

When Tokyo 2020 was postponed, I had to decide whether to resume my medical studies or continue on towards the Olympics and potentially have that door shut.

The decision wasn't tough, I knew med school wouldn't

have me back if I continued but everything else was uncertain. Honestly I was burnt out, it wasn't worth it for me. I love rowing but I have no regrets, I didn't have another year of that intensity and that lifestyle in me just to go to the Olympics. That sounds like a strange thing to say, but I was really satisfied with how I'd competed.

I would prefer to say I'm an Olympian, but that's not the reality. There was a time of processing that and moving on. But my faith allowed me to do that probably easier than a lot of my peers because I could trust that the Lord is sovereign and this is His will for my life.

Christians in Sport supports a number of athletes like Anastasia, at the pinnacle of their sport. It's a context that bring specific pressures, athletes often find that many of their relationships are predominantly about their performance first and them second. The refreshing truth that they're loved unconditionally by God, regardless of performance, is a key focus of our work with athletes at the top-level. It's this counter-cultural message that brings freedom from all the pitfalls of elite sport, inflated pride, despair in defeat, finding identity in achievement. Please pray for this work, that God would continue enabling us to bring Jesus' message of hope and security to those in the performance dominated culture of elite sport.



LISTEN TO THE CHRISTIANS IN SPORT PODCAST FOR MORE INTERVIEWS WITH TOP SPORTSPEOPLE LIKE ANASTASIA. VISIT CHRISTIANSINSPO.RG.UK/PODCAST

INTRODUCING THE DEVELOPMENT SQUAD

Every year Sports Plus plays a huge part within our vision to reach every sportsperson with the good news of Jesus.

It's first and foremost about young people, but the weeks also provide a brilliant opportunity to encourage sportspeople of every age to connect sport and faith.

This summer we're rolling out a new scheme for those slightly too old to attend Sports Plus as young people – the Development Squad.



INVESTING IN YOUNG PEOPLE AFTER SPORTS PLUS

Why do we have 18-21 year-olds at Sports Plus? It's simple, they're sportspeople and we want to encourage them to connect sport and faith! But we recognise that this age group is distinct from our young people and adult leaders and coaches.

18-21 year-olds have traditionally slotted into Sports Plus as 'Trainees.' In recent years we've run two separate schemes for Trainees to cater for different needs, and this summer we're seeking to further define these two schemes to best serve those that join them.

The Trainee 2 scheme is a stepping stone to leading or coaching at Sports Plus. Its purpose is to give young Christian sportspeople the opportunity to receive direct training and investment to grow their talents and understanding with a view to leading teams or coach at Sports Plus in the near future. The Trainee 1 scheme serves a different purpose, and this is why we're revamping it this summer.

WHY THE DEVELOPMENT SQUAD?

Many young people attend Sports Plus year on year, and parents often feedback that Sports Plus is a highlight of the summer for their child.

But what happens when you turn 18? We want to have a clear role to step into for young people that love Sports Plus, as well as an opportunity for young sportspeople to experience Sports Plus if they've never been before.

And yet we recognise that people of this age are still figuring a lot of things out. Some will be firm believers in Jesus, but other's won't have made that commitment. Some will be ready to start training to lead teams or to coach, but others will still have a few years before they're ready to do that. The Development Squad is an opportunity to invest in sportspeople at this specific stage with a high quality week of sport and Bible teaching, whilst not assuming or expecting anything when it comes to faith in Christ.

This is why we've re-launched the trainee 1 scheme as the 'Development Squad.'


THIS SUMMER

So, what can members of the Development Squad expect this year? The programme has its own small team of leaders, delivering biblical teaching on the basics of the Christian faith throughout the week connecting and applying this teaching directly to sport.

The squad will enjoy lots of opportunity to play sport together alongside serving within various elements of Sports Plus.

There will also be opportunity for members find support on moving between life stages in their journey with Christians in Sport, whether that's looking to train to serve as a leader at Sports Plus in future, finding a university group, or getting plugged into one of our adult local networks. Our aim is to reach every sports person with the good news of Jesus. Our hope for the development squad is to do just that – to create an exciting, open and caring context within which 18-21 year olds can learn more about the Christian faith and connect it with their sport.





HOW CAN I BE DISTINCTIVE AS A CHRISTIAN AMONGST OTHER PARENTS AND GUARDIANS OF YPAS?

Life can be stretched when your children play high level sport, and Christians in Sport are here to support you in keeping the main thing the main thing by putting Christ above all else.

This article is taken from our booklet for parents/guardians of Young Performance Athletes (YPAs) which looks at 10 of the most common questions and issues they might face. You can get a free copy at christiansinsport.org.uk/questions

Supporting a child on an elite sport pathway is an incredible privilege, but it's a challenging road with immense joy and celebration or dejection and despair at every fork in the road. As a parent, living out your faith as you support your child is also a brilliant opportunity. The culture of high performance sport doesn't seamlessly overlap with Christianity so, whilst there are tensions, there are brilliant opportunities to share the good news of Jesus.

Here's some food for thought as you look to live distinctively amongst other parents of young performance athletes.

REMEMBER YOUR IDENTITY

As parents and guardians, we need to remember what the gospel has achieved for us - everything! Because of this, we live to a different drum beat and obey the call to be who we have become...to live out a life that is distinct. The danger is that our focus can be so wrapped up in our children that we forget who we have become and don't pay as much attention to our behaviour, thought processes and witness to the other parents and guardians around us. Yet with the large amount of time often spent with them, what an opportunity we have to invest in these relationships.



PRAY PLAY SAY

Pray, play, say (see Colossians 4 v 2-6) is a brilliant framework to use as you think about ways to be distinctive. This simple but helpful method is just as applicable to parents and guardians as it is for players.

So, what does this look like?

- **Pray** for other parents and guardians on the way to, during and after sport training and fixtures: (v 3) That God would open a door for you to speak of the message of Jesus. (v 4) That you would be bold in taking those opportunities to chat about your faith.
- **Play** (v 5) Be wise in the way you act around other parents and guardians at training and fixtures. It's good to look in the mirror regularly and ask yourself how your behaviour matches the message you bring. Where are you tempted to conform to the pattern of the world you're immersed in? How is your attitude towards officials, coaches and your child when they are performing? Ask God to help you be wise, so that the light of your new identity might be seen by all around you.
- **Say** (v 6) How can you let your conversation be full of grace and seasoned with salt?

A helpful framework might be:

'Your news' - Ask other parents and guardians about their family, their hobbies, their work. Show a real interest in them and try and get to know the rhythms of their lives. In time, at some point they will ask you similar questions.

'My news' - When you are asked such questions, look for natural ways to weave your faith in Jesus throughout your answer. Can you mention church and what a significant impact it has on you each week?

'Good news' - As you become more intentional in your relationships, very often you will have an opportunity to share a little of what the good news of Jesus is. Look for things to invite other parents and guardians along to, like a carol service or guest event and even to come and experience church with you. So, in all of this, we need God's help and His desire that other parents and guardians may see our good deeds and glorify our Father in heaven.

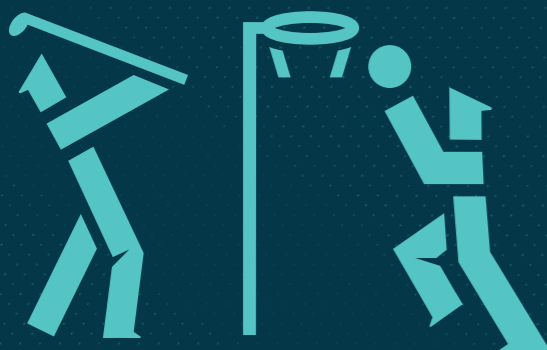
QUESTIONS

- Which other parents and guardians could you be developing relationships with, praying for and seeking to be a witness to?
- What does it look like for you to be distinctive?
- How much of a priority is this for you?

TOP TIP

My husband and I spent a lot of time on the sidelines shivering in the rain with other parents! We tried to welcome new parents, not criticise the referee or manager in conversations and we tried to show a consistent care and love for the girls, however they had played, well or not.

- Parents of a YPA footballer





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01869 255 630

INFO@CHRISTIANSINSPORT.ORG.UK

WWW.CHRISTIANSINSPORT.ORG.UK