

7-28-2020

## The Christian Athlete Through Four Generations

Carrie E.S. Jespersen

Cedarville University, [cjespersen@cedarville.edu](mailto:cjespersen@cedarville.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/idea\\_of\\_an\\_essay](https://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/idea_of_an_essay)



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

### Recommended Citation

Jespersen, Carrie E.S. (2020) "The Christian Athlete Through Four Generations," *The Idea of an Essay*. Vol. 7, Article 5.

Available at: [https://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/idea\\_of\\_an\\_essay/vol7/iss1/5](https://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/idea_of_an_essay/vol7/iss1/5)

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of English, Literature, and Modern Languages at DigitalCommons@Cedarville. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Idea of an Essay by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Cedarville. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@cedarville.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@cedarville.edu).

## The Christian Athlete Through Four Generations

Carrie Jespersen  
*Cedarville University*

**I**t is important to consider the pressures that Christian athletes face from teammates, coaches, fans, and media. As a professional athlete myself, I find many of these pressures applicable in my life. I play baseball on my provincial team and a few years ago I made the extended roster for the Women's Team Canada baseball. Most or all of the athletes I play with are not Christians. I have noticed some team mates, coaches, and parents acting differently around me because of my belief system. For example, they try not to swear around me and they stop gossiping when I am in ear shot. Some of my team mates have asked me what I believe and why. These situations have helped me to realize that sports are an opportunity from God to represent him. Several professional athletes have succeeded in holding to their convictions because their ultimate goal is to please God and bring him the glory. Throughout the past four generations, three key professional Christian athletes have given God the glory by refusing to compromise despite criticism from society.

The first of these was Eric Liddell, a missionary kid born in China. He was an unbelievable athlete and made it to the Olympics. His favorite race was the 100-meter dash, but this race was on a Sunday. Liddell refused to run because he believed that Sunday was a day of rest and worship; he held to his conviction even though he knew there would be discontentment from society. Some people admired him for holding to his convictions and others thought that religion should come after sports (McCasland 76-78). Liddell gave up his personal glory and in turn God received the glory. He knew that there would be an abundance of talk around his decision to miss his 100-meter race, but his heart was set. Liddell prioritized his faith

above sports; he recognized that God was the most important thing in his life.

A little over 60 years later, another man stood out for his beliefs. Bobby Richardson is a professional Christian athlete who was able to honor God by holding to his convictions in the midst of pressure from his team mates to drink alcohol. He had an eleven-year major league baseball career from 1955-1966. After Richardson's baseball games some of his team mates would go out to drink. He refused to go with them even though they teased him for not coming. Christopher Stevenson wrote an article on the pressures that Christian athletes face, and his research aligned with Richardson's experience. Stevenson found that one of the main pressures centers around building a relationship with the coach and the team as a Christian (243). Athletes are still facing some of the same difficulties four generations ago as they are today. Richardson was not afraid to be known as a Christian among his team mates. He was not afraid to stand out and be an outsider. Often, when Richardson signs his autograph he writes Romans 1:16 (Gillespie). This is a powerful verse to remind Richardson that the gospel is not something to be afraid of because it has power to save others. Realizing the power of the gospel helped him to stand up for his beliefs.

Tim Tebow is a recent professional Christian athlete who similarly held to his convictions. He has been glorifying God throughout his career even when the media scrutinizes his actions. Tebow competed in college football and then made it to the NFL and has recently retired. He currently plays minor league baseball for the New York Mets. While he was playing college football, he faced temptations to have sex before he was married and to indulge in the sins of the world. Tebow had already prepared himself to face this challenge before it happened. Because of this, he was able to stay pure through that time. Tebow realized that temptations are going to come, and that Christians have to be ready to deal with them in a God honoring way (Schwab). This is not the only time Tebow has faced adversity from society. The media always seems to be looking for a way to criticize him for his actions and what he believes (Hawzen 15). Christian athletes face pressure to conform to society in many different ways, but they choose not to because of

their desire to glorify God. A major theme of Christian athletes and how they overcome adversity in athletics is by choosing another option and recognizing who their God is.

Eric Liddell kept his priorities straight which allowed him honor God and overcome adversity. Liddell refused to run his 100-meter race on Sunday and instead went to church. He then decided to train for the 200-meter and the 400-meter races because their finals were not on a Sunday, allowing him to compete. Liddell's chances to win the 200- and 400-meter race decreased because he had not trained for them before. The media made sure to point out his inadequacy to win and continually criticized him for his taking the entire Sunday as a sabbath (McCasland 87-98). Kretschmann, Rolf, and Caroline Benz wrote an article exploring the different opinions people have on sports and religion. Some people believe that faith and sports are a bad combination because they are complete opposites of each other. They argue that religion is sacred and about the supernatural, and sports are secular (9-10). The secular world wanted Liddell to ignore his faith and participate in the race even if it went against his convictions. Liddell mixed his faith and his sport and showed which one mattered most to him. He placed second in the 200-meter race and he won the 400-meter race, even breaking a world record. Liddell realized that he did not win because he refused to run on a Sunday. Rather he won because the Lord was gracious to him and granted him success (McCasland 87-98). Liddell was confident that he was doing the right thing by not running on Sunday, even if it meant missing his favorite race. Liddell enjoyed his success and recognized that he was not responsible for it; God was. This perspective allowed Liddell to honor God in his sport.

Bobby Richardson did not have to change which days he played baseball in order to honor God, but he did have to change what happened after the games. Richardson stood out on his team because he resisted the temptation to drink with his peers. When Richardson's team would go out to drink, he would instead take Tony Kubek, his Christian teammate, out to dinner. Because of this ritual, they acquired the nickname "milk-shake twins". They endured this teasing and continued to hold to what they believed was right. Richardson chose to follow his convictions even if it

meant not spending time with his entire team. In the meantime, he built a relationship with another Christian on his team, which in turn helped him to stick to his beliefs (Gillespie). Richardson was prepared to act on his beliefs even if it meant standing out.

Similarly, Tim Tebow's view on celibacy differed from societies beliefs. Tim Tebow resisted the temptation to have sex before marriage by remembering who he represented and why it was important to live out his faith (Schwab). All three of these professional athletes resisted temptation by recognizing who they were in light of Christ. This allowed them to follow the Word of God, knowing that immediate gratification from temptation would never be as fulfilling as delayed gratification in Christ.

One way Christians can depart from following the God's Word is by embracing the praise of others. Professional athletes have ample opportunity to claim their success as their own, rather than recognizing that all the glory they receive belongs to God, who created them. Eric Liddell gave God all the glory that he was receiving from the public. He knew that God was gracious and granted him success in his 400-meter race. Liddell later became a missionary in China and dedicated his whole life to serve God faithfully (McCasland 77). He did not let the fame of the Olympics get in the way of his walk with the Lord. He stuck to his convictions and lived them out faithfully even unto death.

Bobby Richardson lived faithfully for God by holding to his beliefs and sharing them with others on his team. Mickey Mantle was one teammate that became Richardson's close friend. When their major league baseball careers were over, they maintained their relationship and continued to talk about spiritual things. Although their relationship continued to grow, Mickey did not decide to make a personal decision to follow Christ for a while. Eventually, when Mickey was on his death bed, Richardson came to see him. Mickey told him that he had accepted Jesus as his savior (Little). God used this relationship Richardson had built with Mickey to bring him to the Lord. Richardson was able to witness to his friend Mickey because he remained a humble servant of the Lord. God magnified his glory through Richardson as he faithfully served God by living a pure life.

Because of the strong relationships Richardson had created, he was able to speak truth into his teammates' lives, ultimately bringing glory to God and not himself.

Tebow's position and reputation provide an abundance of opportunities for him to magnify God's glory rather than his own. Tebow was able to donate money to build a hospital in the Philippines which focuses on orthopedics. He did this because he wanted to share God's love with others around him so that they too may know God ("Tim Tebow building hospital in Philippines"). Mosley, Michael J., et al. explore athletes' perspectives on the connection between faith and athletics in their article about spirituality and sport. They discovered that all of the athletes they interviewed expressed that playing sports was a gift and privilege given to them by God (381). The athletes interviewed in this article held the same view Tebow holds about giving God glory through the opportunities presented by sports. God has blessed Tebow with the gift of playing football at the highest level possible and allowed him to earn money through the game he enjoyed. Tebow has used the money he had made through his sport to honor God by building a hospital in the Philippines to help children rather than using it for personal gain. Tebow used the blessings that God has given him to give back to the Lord humbly.

Liddell, Richardson and Tebow were all able to honor God through their athletic endeavors by representing God well and holding to their convictions even in the face of criticism. God uses sports as an opportunity to work through Christian athletes to bring others to salvation. Because each of these men persevered through criticism, chose to follow God, and valued God's glory over their own, they were able to make a difference in the world of sports.

## Works Cited

- Gillespie, Kelli. "Bobby Richardson." *Risen Magazine*, [www.risenmagazine.com/bobby-richardson/](http://www.risenmagazine.com/bobby-richardson/)).
- Hawzen, Matthew G., and Joshua I. Newman. "The Gospel According to Tim Tebow: Sporting Celebrity, Whiteness, and the Cultural Politics of Christian Fundamentalism in America." *Sociology of Sport Journal*, vol. 34, no. 1, Mar. 2017, pp. 12–24. SocINDEX, doi:10.1123/ssj.2016-0079.
- Kretschmann, Rolf, and Caroline Benz. "Morality of Christian Athletes in Competitive Sports - A Review." *Sport Science Review*, vol. 21, no. 1/2, Apr. 2012, pp. 5–20. SPORTDiscus, [cedarville.ohionet.org/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=s3h&AN=76250318&site=eds-live](http://cedarville.ohionet.org/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=s3h&AN=76250318&site=eds-live).
- Little, Aaron M. Bobby Richardson: Saving the Mick, CBN, 31 Jan. 2018, [www1.cbn.com/700club/bobby-richardson-saving-mick](http://www1.cbn.com/700club/bobby-richardson-saving-mick).
- McCasland, Dave. *Eric Liddell : Pure Gold : A New Biography of the Olympic Champion Who Inspired Chariots of Fire*. Grand Rapids, MI : Discovery House Publishers, c2001., 2001. Centennial Library Catalog, [cedarville.ohionet.org/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat02007a&AN=cedar.b1159624&site=eds-live](http://cedarville.ohionet.org/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat02007a&AN=cedar.b1159624&site=eds-live).
- Mosley, Michael J., et al. "Spirituality & Sport: Consulting the Christian Athlete." *Sport Psychologist*, vol. 29, no. 4, Dec. 2015, pp. 371–386. SPORTDiscus, [cedarville.ohionet.org/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=s3h&AN=111875568&site=eds-live](http://cedarville.ohionet.org/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=s3h&AN=111875568&site=eds-live).
- Schwab, Frank. "TEMPTATION IN SPORTS, Part 5: Tebow Saving Himself for Marriage." *Colorado Springs Gazette*, *The Colorado Springs Gazette*, L.L.C., 18 Aug. 2010, [gazette.com/news/temptation-](http://gazette.com/news/temptation-)

in-sports-part-tebow-saving-himself-for-marriage/  
article\_4430a8ec-8835-50cb-8e49-5354c5ffe166.html.

Stevenson, Christopher L. "Christian Athletes and the Culture of Elite Sport: Dilemmas and Solutions." *Sociology of Sport Journal*, vol. 14, no. 3, Sept. 1997, pp. 241-262. SocINDEX, doi:10.1123/ssj.14.3.241.

"Tim Tebow building hospital in Philippines."  
*Denver Business Journal*, 15 Nov. 2011.

