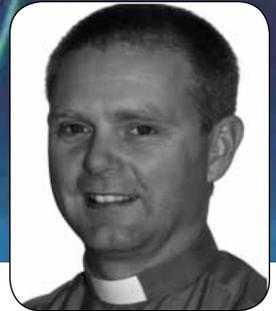
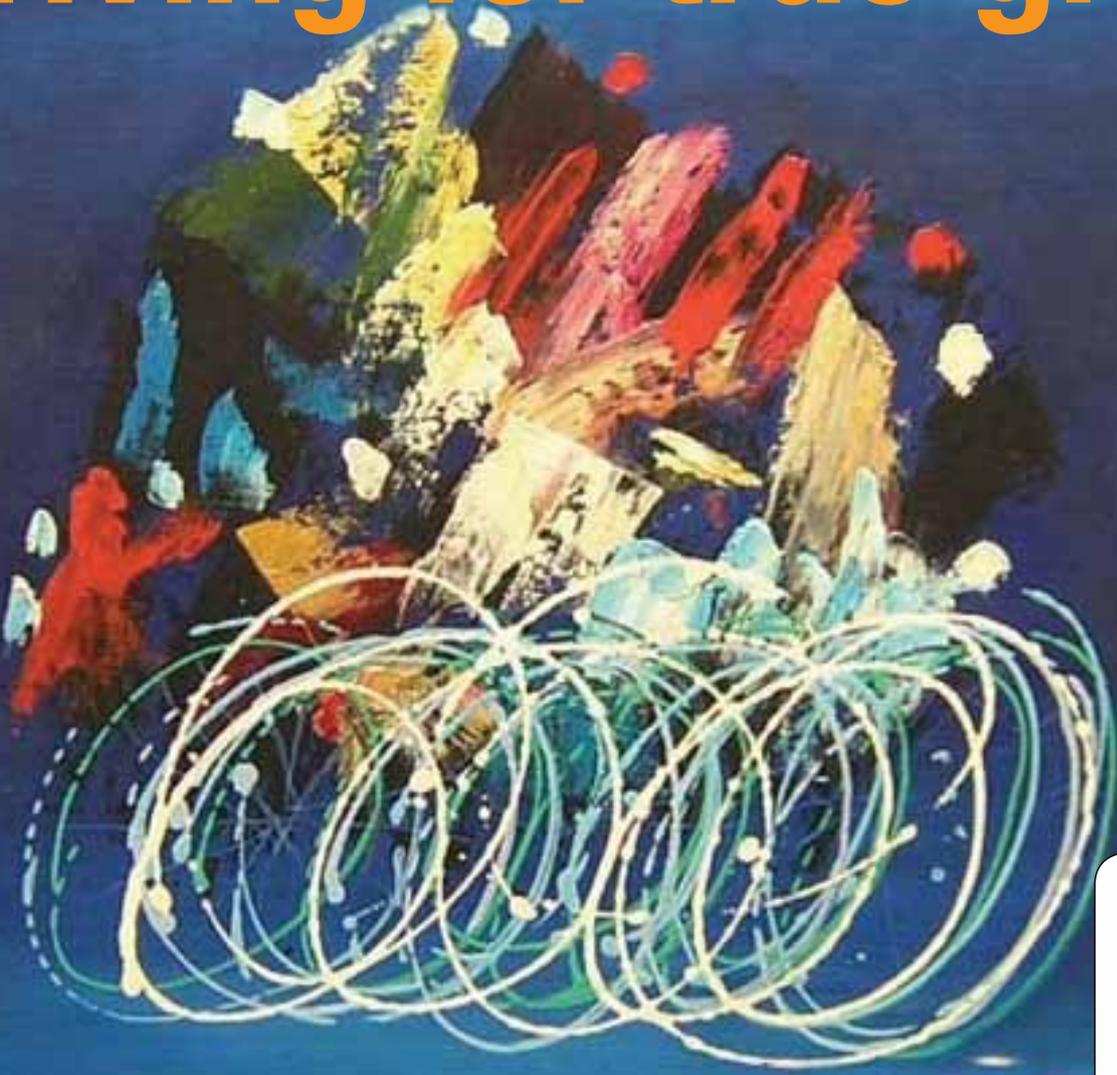


# Striving for true glory



**'As the Olympics approaches let's hear the Spirit as He whispers afresh and stirs our spirits to true glory, to the greatest prize,'** Mark Tanner writes

**N**ow this is not exactly a competition . . . but in less than 30 seconds how many verses can you think of in the Bible which are about sports?

The ones that spring into my mind are the references in Acts (20: 24), Corinthians (1 Cor 9: 24), Galatians (2: 2 & 5: 7), Timothy (2 Tim 4: 7) and Hebrews (12: 1) about running the race, the instruction to Timothy (1 Tim 4: 8, echoed in 1 Cor 9: 28) to train spiritually like an athlete does physically and mentally.

I think, too, of references to fighting and war: many of these are clearly about battling in all its bloody and terrible reality, but in their context there are repeated references to training for war as a thing which is almost sporting. It is valiant, honourable, pure and to the glory of

God. I think, for example, of Psalm 144: 1, where it is God Himself who is the trainer. In a robust and combative culture such a reference to training is far less unsettling than it is for us. This is about identity, purpose, allegiance, faithfulness, worship, belonging, and has a fascinating consequence to which we shall return later.

## **We usually shy away from the whole idea of competition for fear of demeaning those who don't win**

I am sure that there are other references and, should you wish to do so, you could delight the editor by sending in lots of emails crammed full of them.

Perhaps we should set aside a laurel wreath in ReSource HQ

for the person who sends in the most comprehensive and creative compendium. We could have a crowning ceremony and a leaderboard to be inscribed with the name of the most Biblically literate ReSource supporter as determined by regular competition.

Silly idea? Perhaps. Certainly it is an idea that would run counter

to much contemporary wisdom and practice. We usually shy away from the whole idea of competition for fear of demeaning those who don't win. We can mock the idea of a non-competitive sports day at our children's schools, but we find

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ourselves in a bind because we don't want to put down those who do not win. Which of us enjoyed being the last person to be chosen to be on the football/netball/hockey/rugby team at school?

And so, for these reasons and others, we find ourselves in a modern Church in which the use and exploration of sporting metaphors is almost non-existent. Likewise we avoid military language and concepts; when was the last time, for example, you sang 'Fight the Good Fight' or 'Onward Christian Soldiers'? It's possible that you have recently heard a sermon on sports, but I would lay odds that this was only because the Olympics are coming and we want to make use of them for the Kingdom.

We rightly understand ourselves to be called to be agents of grace, of healing, of love, and of community and our understanding of these concepts draws us away from sporting, competitive, or combative language.

My problem with this is that, in losing this thread of traditional Christian and Biblical thinking we find ourselves conceptually and linguistically impoverished in a manner that leaves us pallid, limp and unappealing to huge numbers of people, particularly to younger men. Mentioning young men does not make this a sexist, or indeed an exclusive, observation. They, or rather their absence, is a real problem in today's Church. We are almost universally failing to engage with young people and with young males in particular. This is a pressing and urgent weakness that we need to address.

What, then, do you hear when people get passionate about sport? To start with, you hear passion. You come across people who know themselves to belong to something they believe in and which matters to them. You hear about competition in which they are interested and engaged.

You see people who will travel great distances, commit their wealth, dress in frankly bizarrely striped tops (I should know, I support Leicester Tigers) all to get behind something which matters to them. Here, at its best, you find loyalty which inspires. You see people whose honour is at stake, and this is just among the fans.

On the field you see all manner of other virtues being displayed in a surprisingly visible way. What we tend to notice are the times when such virtues are abandoned, but actually this demonstrates just how central certain characteristics are to our understanding of sports. So, for example, when a rugby player loses his temper after an hour of being jumped on, shouted at, tripped up, and squashed we regard it as a terrible loss of form. A professional sportsman should, after all, be sportsmanlike!

In the sporting arena we see a commitment to a common and higher goal which makes grown men set everything else aside. We see team loyalty and cooperation which is rarely found elsewhere, apart of course from in the military. We see people devoted to training in order that they might perform when it matters. We see joy which is uninhibited and contagious. We see disappointment which is embraced and (sometimes) overcome. We see aspiration, reward, selflessness, and measurability of outcomes in the rawest of terms . . .

**We see joy which is uninhibited and contagious. We see disappointment which is embraced and (sometimes) overcome. We see aspiration, reward, selflessness . . .**

and we see people transfixed, transported, even overcome. Men, women, children, and especially young men are there giving their all in playing and in supporting.

This is easy to observe, of course, and it would be theologically naïve simply to claim that you can transplant this passion into the Church and all will be well. You can't, but neither can we ignore the questions it raises for us.

Questions like: 'In what sense should

we compete in faith?' 'How far can we think of sport as a good paradigm for discipleship?' With these questions come a raft of others. What are we playing for? Who are we competing with? In what sense do we win? What happens if we lose? Do we get to wear stripey shirts?

**He created us for life and joy and holiness. It is a proper challenge to seek to excel in holiness, to eagerly desire the greater gifts and seek to use them well.**

A full consideration of these questions is obviously beyond the scope of an article like this, but let me make a few observations.

Firstly, there are a number of very clear prizes for which we are competing. There is a crown of righteousness (2 Tim 4: 8) which is in store for Paul as he completes the race. There is a real sense in the Scriptures of striving to be holy, to grow in righteousness, to run the race that is before us.

We should not underestimate the importance of competing for the pleasure of God. He created us for life and joy and holiness. It is a proper challenge to seek to excel in holiness, to eagerly desire the greater gifts and seek to use them well. It is also vital that we seek to excel in humility, of course, as we seek to mirror Christ's attitude (Phil 2), but this does not negate what I am suggesting. There is more: should we not be competing for the Gospel in the public arena? Is it not right to seek to win people for the Lord? Are we not sent to 'fight valiantly' with 'sin, the world, and the devil' for the sake of the Kingdom and the One who calls us home?

I would go further, I think. We fear competing in part because we are so materialistic. Competitive prophecy sounds like a contradiction, and we could easily see how it could be very unhealthy. However this is partly because we think in terms of business. If two corner shops compete and one wins the other goes out of business. In contrast in the sporting arena, if I were to beat you at tennis, which is extraordinarily unlikely by the way, you may well leave determined to play better next time.

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## Striving for true glory



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One of the faith games we like to play is treasure hunting. Here you ask the Lord for specific words about people and places in a town and then you go out and find the people He has described to you. When you find them you pray for them and see what happens. It's great fun. I wonder if it is such a bad thing to be a little competitive in this . . .

Another is 'prophetic call-my-bluff'. Here you listen for a word, write it down and then add two made-up ones. Then the rest of the group say which they think is from God. Kids love it and are really keen to join in listening for words and pictures and it is delightful to enjoy what they hear God saying.

**They prayed passionately and urgently and repeatedly urged each other, and God, on by waving their fists and shouting things like 'Come on, God!', as if supporting Him in heroic endeavours. It was profound, powerful and holy.**

Would it be a mistake to bring an athlete's dedication to your discipleship? Is it foolish to look for a sporting delight in excelling for Christ? Always remembering, of course, that the prize is the greater glory of God? How would evangelism in your church change if you had the single-minded focus of a Wayne Rooney? OK, that might not be the best example, but think David Beckham or Jonny Wilkinson and their obsessive kicking practice. What about prayer? This discussion brings to mind the image of some good friends of mine, all young adult youth workers, preparing for a major summer conference and

gathered in a kind of rugby scrum to pray. They prayed passionately and urgently and repeatedly urged each other, and God, on by waving their fists and shouting things like 'Come on, God!', as if supporting Him in heroic endeavours. It was profound, powerful and holy.

How would the growth of the younger members of Church, particularly the younger men, change if they saw themselves as being in teams which were nurtured and cherished, which had specific and measurable targets for which they would train and to which they would be accountable? To me that sounds much like a team of twelve called together and then sent out on the greatest mission of all time.

Perhaps a little less PC and a bit more FC (or should that be JC?) might be a good thing for each of us. As the Olympics approaches let's hear the Spirit as He whispers afresh and stirs our spirits to true glory, to the greatest prize, to fight and run and win and take hold of that for which He has taken hold of us. **r**

### about the writer

**The Revd Mark Tanner** is Warden of Cranmer Hall, the Theological College within Durham University, and is married with two children. He has previously served in four Northern and mainly urban parishes and worked with ReSource and other national agencies in the areas of mission, renewal, and resourcing Kingdom ministry. He is currently writing on *Being an Introverted Charismatic* and *The Power of Speech*.

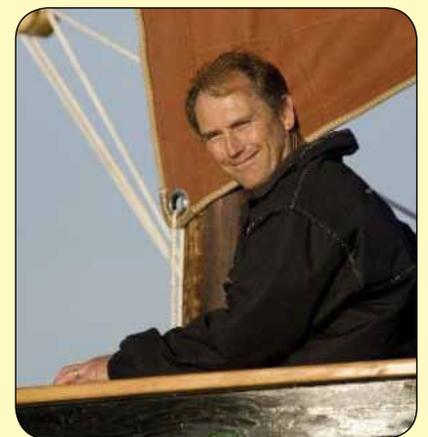


**At St George's, Swallowbeck, sport and mission go hand in hand. [Full story on page 18](#)**

## Sporting heroes



**John Landy** is remembered for his performance in the 1500 metres final at the 1956 Australian National Championships prior to the Melbourne Olympic Games. In the race, Landy stopped and doubled back to check on fellow runner Ron Clarke after another runner clipped Clarke's heel, causing him to fall early in the third lap of the race. Clarke, the then-junior 1500 metre world champion, who had been leading the race, got back to his feet and started running again; Landy followed. Incredibly, in the final two laps Landy made up a large deficit to win the race. Landy's gesture is considered one of the greatest moments in Australian sporting history. Said the National Centre for History and Education in Australia, 'It was a spontaneous gesture of sportsmanship and it has never been forgotten.' A bronze sculpture of the moment when Landy helps Clarke to his feet (pictured) was placed on the lawns adjacent to the Olympic Park in Melbourne.



**Yachtsman Pete Goss** (pictured) is best known for his heroic rescue, in horrendous conditions, of a fellow competitor in the 1996/7 Vendee Globe round the world race. He sacrificed his place in the race to sail back 160 miles against 60 knot winds to find and rescue the Frenchman, Raphael Dinelli. For his heroism he was awarded the French Legion d'Honneur and an MBE.