

# Sports News

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## The Thrill of Victory... The Agony of Defeat!

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By Jerry Borrowman – Utah Salt Lake City Area Sports Communications Director

For those natural born athletes out there for whom an athletic contest is an exciting way to prove one's physical prowess and stamina, (probably a majority of those reading this newsletter), the chance to play organized sports is a welcome relief from the tedium of everyday life.

But for a subset of the population who are, (how to say this politely), as coordinated as a woolly mammoth trying to compete in precision ski jumping, a sport like Dodge Ball boils down to some very simple words like "predator" and "prey."

To speak plainly, organized sports are, for some, a frightening and humiliating experience to be avoided or endured. In view of that it's fair to ask if Church Sports has any relevancy for those in this group. Fortunately, the editor can speak with some authority to that subject as a qualifying and lifetime member of the Non-Athletic Club. By the way, it's very difficult for athletes to understand this point-of-view as evidenced by the questions they often ask those of us in the clumsy set. Questions like:

*What about a low contact sport like Volleyball? It's such a cheerful little sport with three full chances to get the ball back over the net—anyone can do that.* Speaking for the athletically challenged we see it more as an opportunity to flail helplessly in the air as the ball comes straight towards us for the easiest of all returns, only to fall harmlessly to the floor at our feet. A real crowd pleaser for the opposition, but not so much for one's own team.

*But surely you like Physical Ed class—that much needed break from the mind-numbing routines of academia?"* The equivalent of a life sentence to a Russian Gulag (prison).

*It's all in good fun—so why take it so personally?"* Embarrassment is always personal. So is the red spot left on one's face from a well-thrown volleyball.

Let's summarize: Competition for the unskilled is embarrassing and stressful because:

- You fear you'll let your teammates down.

- It hurts to be chosen last, even when you know you deserve it.
- You're just not interested, but society thinks you should be.
- You can't help but feel like an outsider when it seems everyone else knows the standings in a particular college or professional sport and you don't.

At least that's how I've often felt. Which is why it's one of those delightful ironies that sometimes defines our Church callings that it has fallen to me, one of the outsiders to become the spokesman for Church Sports in the Utah Salt Lake City Area—tasked with avidly promoting its virtues to members everywhere. Just what's a fella to do?

After laughing out loud when issued the call, here is how I've reconciled myself to Church Sports. Perhaps my experience will be helpful to others, like me, who are not inclined to sports, and who may inadvertently harm and diminish a program that is endorsed by the First Presidency and that is cherished by hundreds of thousands of members and friends of other faiths throughout the world.

First, of course, are the spiritual and emotional aspects of Church Sports, which are easy to talk about and to believe in:

- The unparalleled opportunity of teams sports to build camaraderie, fellowship, and teamwork.
- The easy approach Church Sports offers those who would reach out to friends and neighbors to introduce them to members of the ward and stake in a non-threatening way.
- A positive way for adults to interact with young people as they assume responsibility for coaching and refereeing youth games.
- The physical benefits of exercise in an increasingly sedentary society where bowling is now done with a remote control rather than a bowling ball.
- Perhaps most powerfully of all, the endorsement of the First Presidency and Area leaders who find virtue in sponsoring opportunities for members to come together socially, as well as during the formal meetings of the church.

All of these are, indeed, great reasons, to promote Church Sports. But still not enough to drag at least some of us out to the basketball court. Yet at the end of the day there ought to be something for everyone. If we could find at least one Church sponsored sport or activity that appeals

to even the most shell-shocked non-participants amongst us, then truly Church Sports would be a program worth implementing in every ward and stake. Those who are reluctant to join need a positive experience with sports if they are to get past their prejudice and join in the fun.

And so it is time to tell the embarrassing but inspiring tale of my one great athletic achievement—the moment when an entire high school gym class of more than 100 came together to support the chubby kid who always struggled. Then we'll talk about sports that can appeal to the non-athletes among us:

Pocatello High School, 1969, sophomore P-E and the infernal standardized tests that define how physically fit we all were. Perhaps the six worst days of the year for me (except, ironically, sit-ups—I could do more than 100 of them—an offset to the number of chin-ups I couldn't do).

All the tasks in the tests were hard, but the most fearful for me was climbing the rope. Lacking upper body strength it was practically impossible to hoist that pleasant little paunch of mine up a swaying rope. For example, on the first of six tries in the course of the year, I leapt for the rope and dangled helplessly in the air a foot or so above the ground. Red-face that day. As the year progressed, the distance from the floor increased—by a few feet. After nine months of toil and conditioning I found myself making it nearly two-thirds of the way up on the fifth try. But still not to the top. A week later, the last week of school, it was to be my last encounter with the rope—ever! The dread of being humiliated once again was almost offset by the knowledge that it would all come to an end somehow—even if only in an ignominious death as I fell to the floor exhausted, dying a martyr's death at the hands of the foul inventor of the rope climb, a tormentor whose name I didn't even know, but whom I despised.

What I didn't count on is that this was to be the day when the other kids in the class (the same ones who had counted on me as an easy target in dodge ball) would suddenly rally to my cause. Here's the story. As my turn approached I moved tentatively towards the rope, heart pounding and breathing shallow. "You can do this, Jerry," the assistant coach said quietly. "Yeah, you can do this," one of my friends said. I wasn't so sure—in fact now I was even more nervous. But anxiously I started up the rope.

It was undoubtedly adrenaline that got me the first 80% of the way up the rope, but at that point even adrenaline failed. I kept trying to climb, but my progress slowed to the point that it looked like failure yet again. I felt so bad and sad I really did want to die. There are no words to describe the despair one feels in the face of public failure. And then it happened, just as I was getting myself in the frame of mind to start down the rope again in humiliation there were six testing stations going on in the gym—and suddenly all six came to a stop. As the room grew quiet I looked down to see every coach and student looking up at me. Now that really was embarrassing! But then to my surprise they started cheering for me. "Come on

Borrowman, you can do it! You can do it!" That was totally unexpected! Not wanting to fail in front of the whole class, rather than just my small group, I started climbing again, Inch by painful inch. It's funny how one finds strength when supported by others. As the cheers reached a crescendo I finally reached up with one last gasp and felt something I'd never felt before—the cold metal of the chain that attached the rope to the ceiling! A giant cheer went up all over the gym and I smiled like I'd never smiled before. I was being cheered for an athletic achievement, and it felt great! I savored the feeling for a few moments, then slithered down the rope to the congratulations of my own group. It didn't matter that the elapsed time wasn't very good—I'd made it. Even our head coach smiled, and then it was over. That moment has undoubtedly never been recalled by anyone in that room but me. But that was the day I finally understood sports, the knowledge of how great it feels to challenge oneself to achieve something hard and to do it.

Well, I didn't rush out and sign an NFL contract, but I did start to take an interest in sports, both as a team manager and as a fan. I even learned to like the athletes. They turned out to be regular guys who were willing to make a place for me. And in doing so my life became richer.

As an adult I've learned to like bowling, horseshoes, hiking, and Scrabble (I know, it's not a sport, but it certainly is competitive). My wife has taught me to go snowshoeing, and I like swimming and going to a football game or two to watch the young men in our Priest Quorum play. Cross-country skiing about killed me, but in the end I lived through it and saw some beautiful scenery. And I loved coaching my sons' soccer teams and acting as the scorekeeper for their Church and community basketball games. So, while I will never be called an athlete, I have learned that sports and activities can play an important role in my life. My athletic success is measured by climbing to the top of a mountain, or hiking to a waterfall. Or beating Bruce Bowen (my horseshoe nemesis) with the steel bands. Even something as simple as taking a brisk walk with my wife to the park.

I hope you recognize that each of the activities I've mentioned have been sponsored as group activities by wards and stakes in our area—hopefully in your stake. I really want to make the case that Church Sports is for everyone, even those who may not enjoy playing the big three (basketball, softball, volleyball). Life is richer because our church takes an interest in more than Sunday mornings. For those of you responsible for Church Sports, be of good cheer and stay committed. You make a positive difference.

To those of you who do not like sports and don't want to join in, try to recall all the spiritual benefits listed earlier and then, at the very least, don't get in the way of those who do. Church Sports really is a part of the gospel program. Perhaps we can all find ways to benefit from its positive aspects and to share it with friends and neighbors.

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