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### A Christian Framework for Competitive Sport

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## QUESTION

Does competitive sport truly fit within a framework of Christian ethics and values?

## CAMPS

### SIMPLE "NO"

Authors: Alfie Kohn  
Arguments:  
Kohn's words are straightforward: **competition cannot fit with play**. Within this statement is the underlying statement that **competition is not part of human nature**, and though Kohn is not a Christian himself, his statement is one of theological character. He is not addressing Christian ethics, but **his words can be applied in such a way that would similarly say no to the intersection of competitive sport and Christian ethics**.

### COMPLEX "NO"

Authors: Shirl Hoffman  
Arguments:  
His point is that we can try to justify competitive sport and present an ideal of what sport should or could be, but eventually we have to face the reality that the character of competitive sport does not play out that way. **He is directly responding to the mutualist idea and pointing out that though it sounds nice, it is not reality**.

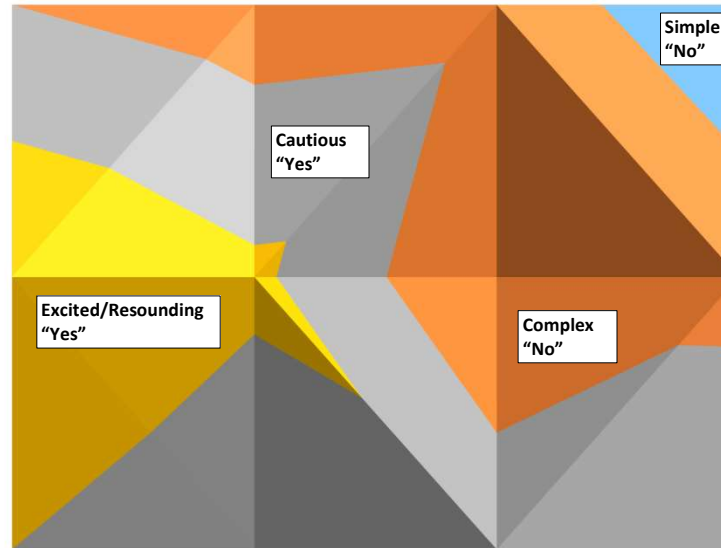
### CAUTIOUS "YES"

Authors: Robert Simon, Drew Hyland  
Arguments:  
The idea found here at the 'hub' is one called mutualism credited to the work and thought of Robert Simon. **Mutualism as defined by Simon and his colleagues is the idea that competition in the context of sport is "a mutual quest for excellence"**. *Mutualism* stems from ideas similar to those of Drew Hyland long before (1978) who spoke of the relational nature of competition. **Hyland points out that the word competition in origin means something close to "striving together" and is therefore relational in orientation**.

### EXCITED/RESOUNDING "YES"

Authors: Robert Ellis, Michael Shafer, Scott Kretchmar  
Arguments:  
Ellis is arguing from a position that **the *imago dei* in us as humans is playful in nature and that competition in sport is distinctly under the umbrella of play**. Shafer pokes a few holes in Hoffman's arguments against things like the pride of wanting to display one's achievements and victory over others as well as competition being a corruption of community. **This display of prowess and achievement over others is not the self-seeking practice Hoffman presents it as and competition in sport is a neutral activity that can devolve into sin or can be engaged for good**. Kretchmar sees and conveys uniquely how much deeper competitive sport goes than just a win or a loss, a victory or a defeat. He speaks about the contest of sport competition and **argues against the perceived antithesis present in sport**.

## LANDSCAPE MAP



## CONCLUSIONS

I put myself in the cautious 'yes' camp. I find this to be my home when it comes to the question of Christianity and competitive sport because I have to recognize the dangers of competition. The process of engaging this landscape of answers has pushed me to further reluctance than I've had before. Maybe this is because I have not had the time to sit with the criticisms and come to the level of conviction which the resounding 'yes' camp displays. Yet, I do know that I believe the mutualist idea of competition holds up and can find its place in Christian thought and practice, though I understand Hoffman's wariness to embrace it.

On the other hand, though I am cautioned at this reality, my reluctance along with Hoffman gives way when met with the hope offered by other scholars. **Although competition can sour, it does not mean that we need to throw the baby out with the bath water**. In this way, I follow in the response of Shafer who believes we cannot do what Hoffman does either and overlook the positives to see only the negatives of competition. All this is to say, we as Christians have a responsibility to consider all of the positives and negatives of participating in competitive sport and come to a conclusion on how we will proceed in engaging sport. **So, cautiously and reluctantly, I say 'yes' we as Christians within today's culture of competition in sport can find ways to engage in sport without compromising on our ethics and values**, but we must give critical thought to how we will participate and embrace competition in its most productive sense.

**The question of 'how?' now begs to be answered. How do Christians participate in competition?**

## SUGGESTIONS FOR CHRISTIAN ATHLETES

- Christian athletes should understand competition as *mutualism*. The Christian athlete is then reminded of the fact that **their opponents are not simply opponents but are actually comrades**.
- Christian athletes should not participate in using terminology that demeans an opponent or dehumanizes them in any way. **The responsibility falls on the Christian athlete to be conscious of the words they are using**. This means motivating without vulgarity and challenging opponents without trash talk. Recognizing the mirror that is the opponent also means playing hard without violence.
- For the Christian athlete, **the end goal of competition should be friendship not alienation, respect not animosity**.
- For the Christian athlete, it can be difficult to hold to these considerations when **money, prestige, and other external motivations** start to sneak into the picture. **These are environments that become more susceptible to the negative sides of competition**.
- Christian athletes should enjoy spontaneous forms of competition like pickup basketball or casual ping pong. **These seem like ripe ground for competition to result in friendship, serving as a training ground for more competitive sports environments**.
- Important for the Christian athlete to understand is that it is **just as possible to engage sport well in competitive settings**. In higher levels of competitive sport, there is always the chance at another contest. These are built into the schedule of the season, allowing for the hope of redemption.
- A Christian athlete should embody the principle of "Christmanship". In the words of Michael Shafer, "Christmanship embodies the best of sportsmanship (fun, fairness, being a good loser, etc.) and the best of gamesmanship (giving one's best effort within the rules to win), but it transcends and surpasses them both." This means **the Christian athlete should always be thinking critically about how Jesus Christ would call them to conduct themselves in the heat of competition**.
- Beyond just the Christian athlete, the consistent test of the Christian life, as a whole, is how we are supposed to live **"in the world but not of the world"**. **For the Christian athlete, competition is no different**.



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