

BACK PAGES

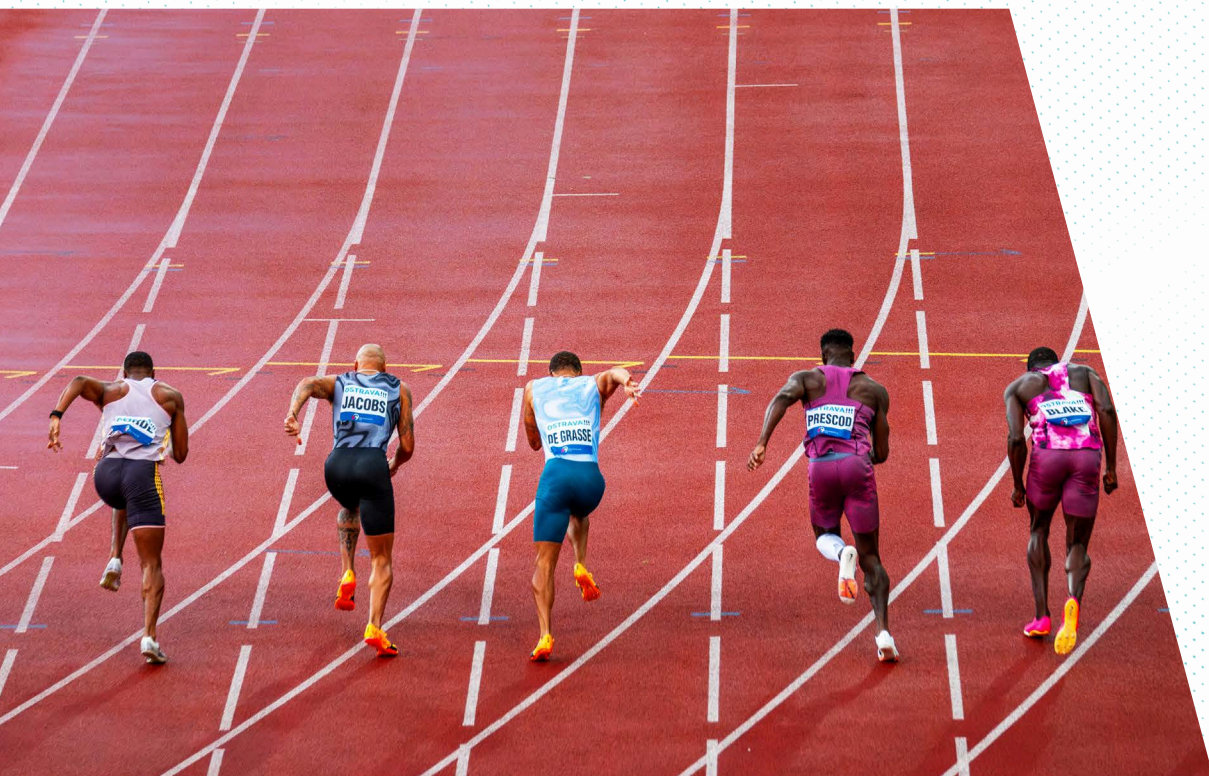
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WE'RE OFF TO WEMBLEY



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

WE EXIST TO REACH THE WORLD OF SPORT FOR JESUS.

Welcome to this summer edition of Back Pages. If you're anything like me, you'll be brimming with excitement for all the sport that's yet to come this year, the high of the Euros has barely died down and the Olympics and Paralympics are just around the corner.

These pinnacle moments in sport capture attention and imagination like nothing else. For many of us watching the Olympics as young people was the first time we witnessed the intensity and energy of competitive sport and thought 'I want to get into that.' Wherever our sporting journey's have taken us, to the elite level, or a local league, there's nothing like the rush of scoring, setting a pb, or coaching someone towards a goal.

Perhaps your journey with Jesus sound at all like this? Witnessing the love of Christ through God's word, the Bible, lived out in the lives of other Christians and thinking - 'I want to get into that.' This summer it's our privilege to support thousands of sportspeople in sharing the hope they have in Christ as they train with their local club, compete at the top level or come together to watch sport's blue riband event.

We remain thankful to God for your partnership as it sustains our mission to reach every sportsperson with the good news of Jesus.

BRIAN GLYNN

Back Pages Editor





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***DIRECTOR'S
MESSAGE***

such a challenge.

What did we find?

The research, carried out by Eido, used pioneering techniques to map the global landscape of professional and elite sport, along with associated ministry activities, and identify consistent themes reported by those leading ministry to elite athletes around the world.

A survey of over 200 key leaders across the world, concluded that these leaders were engaged in personal relationships with close to 4,000 elite athletes. Furthermore 2,500 of these athletes are engaging in 'discipleship' activity with these leaders.

However, this is just scratching the surface of the landscape of elite sport. Furthermore, ministry activities are heavily concentrated in a small number of countries and sports.

The research identified substantial gaps in ministry and untapped potential mission fields, indicating opportunities for ministries to pursue growth and impact where the mission field is large but currently lacks any sports ministry presence. Examples of this range from rugby, which has its highest numbers of professionals in France, and yet no known ministry to professional players in France; to track and field athletics, where there are elite athletes representing numerous countries, but the numbers engaged in sports ministry across the board are very low.

From a qualitative perspective, leaders identified four core barriers to building relationships with elite athletes that do not net know Christ. These match up with the challenges we face at Christians in Sport operating primarily in the UK, including athletes lacking time to give to any activities outside of training, competing or travelling; or having a

performance-based identity fixated on success which reduces openness to a grace-based gospel. Access to elite athletes also proves a fundamental challenge to sports ministry around the world; high profile individuals are often guarded and, for good reason, don't easily build trust outside of their close networks.

A global solution

Despite such challenges, respondents were excited about the opportunity to collaborate to raise the tide of sports ministry to elite athletes. The research identified a strong appetite for mutual support through partnership, with potential to develop better resources for current leaders, alongside training and equipping future leaders. A collaborative approach to funding sports ministry in a landscape where disparate leaders have little time to spend on fundraising also has strategic merit.

Several leaders expressed interest in working together with others to streamline and share core administrative functions, and some thought that through collaboration there might be an opportunity to foster new connections and partnerships with governing bodies and national federations, which might increase the visibility of spiritual support for National Governing Bodies. In our UK ministry context, we've seen glimpses of opportunities like this, with good links to the Football Association, and beginnings of links with organisations like the Rugby Players' Association.

What's next?

It's time to get to work. This research makes a clear case for a global collaborative approach towards ministry to elite athletes. The ministry map clearly identifies where there is rich opportunity to make disciples of Christ in elite sport, but to do this we



Sport	Number of Countries	Total Engagement	Total Discipleship
Football	46	1135	925
Basketball	29	345	195
Baseball	29	550	385
Rugby	8	160	140
American Football	2	410	305

The study identified 13 significant sports that form the core focus of ministry efforts, with these five sports having the greatest engagement with elite athletes.

need to train and equip more leaders. Together with our partners we are just beginning to explore how missional resources and professional development training can be developed as strategic goals to reach this mission field.

Pro Athletes Outreach (PAO), a USA-based organisation that focusses on ministry to professional and elite sportspeople, were a key partner in commissioning this research, and we're thrilled that PAO are seeking to carry the weight of this global vision.

As part of their intention to lead in this area, they've appointed a new global role that sees Greg Morgan move from the Christians in Sport staff to join PAO in a global role. After 20 years of service Greg's contribution will be sorely missed on the staff team, but this marks the start of a brilliant opportunity to partner with PAO more effectively to better serve sportspeople throughout the world.

At Christians in Sport, it is a huge privilege to walk alongside hundreds of Christian elite athletes. To encourage them to enjoy their sport as worship through opening God's word in 1-2-1s, to see groups within sports grow and develop brilliant peer to peer support as they meet throughout the season, and to support them in their witness to those they train with and compete against. Ministry to elite athletes remains core to our vision, but our resource is finite, and we'd be foolish to think we can grow this work without collaboration.

Above all else we rely on a good God to guide us in this work. The same God that gave Eric Liddell joy as he competed, winning Olympic Gold, and perseverance to last the course during his immensely challenging ministry in China, is at work today in the world of sport. Will you pray with us that we would remain obedient to Him as we work out our calling to take the good news of Jesus to sportspeople, including those at the pinnacle of elite sport, knowing that He is Lord of this vast harvest field.

GRAHAM DANIELS

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



4 WAYS TO USE... THE SPORTS MISSION PACK



The summer of sport is upon us and we've created our Sports Mission Pack with all you and your church need to make the most of it in sharing Jesus with sportspeople.

Here's four ways you can use it:

1 PUT ON AN EVENT

The pack includes all you need to run events – whether it's a sports quiz, a watch party or a tournament. We've heard of many churches putting on quizzes, sports tournaments and even a full Olympic themed family fun day for their community this summer.

It's estimated that 9 million people play sport each week in the UK. Within a few miles of your church there will be thousands of people engaged in clubs and teams on a weekly basis. Sport can bring people together like little else can so why don't you make the most of the summer and invite them along to hear something of Jesus.

2 SHARE THE SHORT FILMS WITH YOUR FRIENDS AND FAMILY

We've created two short evangelistic films focussing on the story of Eric Liddell and the joy he found in connecting his sport and his Christian faith. You can find them on our website and send the links onto friends and family who don't know Jesus. If you're on social media you could re-post them from our accounts or download them from the pack to upload yourself. Make sure to follow up with people to find out what they thought.

3 RUN A SPORTS CHURCH SERVICE

Use the films and our guides for running a Sunday service focussed on sport. Use it as an opportunity to invite widely to local sports clubs and teams. The guide has games you can play, ideas for talks and prayers and other ways you can help use the summer events to share Jesus in a church service.

We also have guides for speaking at school assemblies and lessons which could also be adapted to use with your youth groups at church as they focus on the story of Eric Liddell.

4 BUY THE BOOKS OR TRACTS TO GIVE OUT IN YOUR LOCAL AREA

We've produced a short tract and book with 10 of those which you can buy in bulk to give out at events, put through letter boxes or give to your friends at your sports club. It's a clear gospel presentation and invites people to consider "what are we running for?"

Get them in bulk from 10ofthose.com (and pray for everyone who reads a copy, including those in Spanish and French speaking countries where it has been translated).

"We loved using the sports quiz ahead of screening the England game as it was really well put together, great fun and set up the atmosphere nicely to watch the game."

The talk was also well pitched and punchy and got people thinking about the identity of Jesus and why it really matters that we get that right."

Phil Nightingale
Assistant Minister at St Mary's
Chesham

"We gave away 900 tracts to encourage people to consider Jesus ahead of the Paris Olympics. At a local race we arranged a small exhibition of the life and faith of Eric Liddell with tracts available to take away for free, giving them to finishers to take home in race goody bags."

God blessed the occasion with so many opportunities for lovely conversations."

Rev. Hugh Wallace
Church of Scotland Minister

Get the Sports Mission Pack now at:

christiansinsport.org.uk/2024

THE SPORTS MISSION PACK



Two sports quizzes

Two Short Films

Testimony films from former Olympians

An Olympic church service guide

A School assembly and lesson guide

**TO SHARE JESUS DURING THIS
SUMMER OF SPORT, THIS HAS
EVERYTHING YOU NEED.**

Get the Sports Mission Pack now at:
christiansinsport.org.uk/2024



MEET SWANY



The Reach Project is a new initiative, launched by Christians in Sport in 2024, to reach sportspeople in low income and under-served communities.

In January, Mike Swanson or 'Swany' joined the Christians in Sport staff team, working specifically on the Reach Project in Liverpool, we caught up with Mike to learn more about him and his new role.

Tell us about your sport and faith journey, when you put the two together and where do Christians in Sport fit in that story?

Both my parents were Christians and served in youth ministry. So church was normal for me growing up, week nights were filled with Christian activities and Sundays consisted of a morning service, Sunday school, evening service and then bed.

Two of my uncles were football coaches, throughout my primary school years whatever session they were running on a Saturday I was there, and I absolutely loved going along. I was often too young to join in, but I couldn't get enough of it!

In our family church was the priority. TV and sport weren't allowed on Sundays and football was maybe seen as a threat to faith, particularly as my uncles weren't Christians. But to me not playing on a Sunday was normality, moving to secondary school, I knew I wouldn't be able to continue football as it moved to a Sunday, I was upset but I knew that was always the deal.

Instead, I threw my effort into cross-country, running every Saturday morning for school and on the track in the summer. We played casual sport at church, which was my outlet, but I was often criticised for taking it too seriously, being too competitive.



Looking back, I can see that sport and faith were at odds. At age 12 I'd taken ownership of my faith, and no one had ever said sport and faith can't fit, but they were so separated in my head because the two cultures didn't fit. It felt like playing sport almost made me less of a Christian and that my faith made me less of a sportsperson.

My passion for sport followed to university, I studied Sports Development at Liverpool John Moores University and came across Christians in Sport through volunteering to lead at Sports Plus. It was the first time I saw sport as a context for worship. I understood sport as a tool to witness primarily, we'd used sport for evangelism at church and I was familiar with the witness of Christian athletes like Kaka and Eric Liddell, but I'd never seen sport as worship, but now I was getting the Bible open with young people and explaining to them how sport and faith really fit together. It was such a lightbulb moment.

It's why I'm passionate about communicating this to young people. As a young person it felt like you had to choose between sport and faith. To be honest I would have chosen sport if my family and church context wasn't as strict.

Understanding the connection between worship and sport completely changes that, young people can see sport as a context for worship, to grow closer to Jesus, as well as being a great place to share faith.

You joined the staff in January, tell us a bit about your role, what are you doing now?

I've enjoyed getting stuck in. Having worked in schools as a sports coach for a number of years with scripture union as part of a mission project, and as a sports mentor, my new job combines all the things I'm passionate about really well. Reaching and engaging young people with the gospel through sport and helping them to see sport as worship.

This is the core of the Reach Project and my role as an outreach worker – to engage with sportspeople in areas where we haven't done so previously. The focus

is particularly on deprived communities where there are passionate sportspeople, but opportunities are lacking.

For example, in Liverpool, there's a disconnect between the city's passion for sport and the accessibility of sports programmes. Young people in deprived areas are unlikely to get the opportunity to try any sport but football. Even then parents may be unwilling to let their children engage in competitive sport should they be exposed to increasing costs of supporting them.

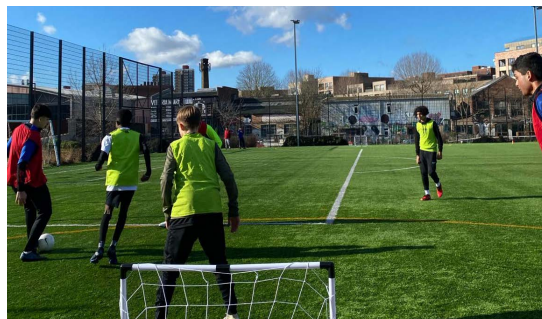
My role, and the project as a whole is to work to enable opportunity in such circumstances, to inspire young sportspeople and point them to Jesus. Alongside aiming to provide expertise and resources to equip local churches to build sustainable ministries that do this too.

As the Reach Project gets off the ground, the bulk of my work is continuing existing programmes in schools where I have relationships. Whilst behind the scenes working with the team to develop good models for ministry going forward. Whether that's non-residential camps in the summer, weekly engagement in schools throughout the term or activities delivered through churches and sports clubs.

Looking to the future, what are you excited about for the future of the Reach Project?

It's been a good start, Liverpool is a unique context of sport and faith in the UK, it's a sport-mad city with a huge number of faith schools, so it's a rich context. In the early summer I've been going into schools, using and adapting our Sports Mission Pack to run classroom sessions, sports tournaments and other events around the summer of sport. It's been a brilliant testing ground to try lots of different approaches.

Going forward we're keen to refine our offer over the next couple of years, to tighten it down so it aligns well with the vision of Christians in Sport. This means working hard on getting in to local sports clubs and connecting people from deprived areas with real sustainable opportunity to enjoy progressing in competitive sport and grow in faith.



The Reach Project is just getting started in a number of cities across the UK, including London (pictured)

We have a few opportunities to run events in sports clubs this summer in partnership with other ministry organisations like ours. Looking ahead, we're working on what it looks like to run non-residential camps in big cities where there are large areas of deprivation, not just in Liverpool but in other places where we have key relationships.

We'd love you for you to pray for these opportunities in the summer, and beyond, that the Reach Project will enable even more sportspeople to hear and respond to the good news of Jesus, and be inspired to live out that faith in the world of competitive sport.

We are excited to engage more sportspeople with the good news of Jesus and allow them to establish new connections.

To support the Reach Project, go to:

**[christiansinsport.org.uk/
support](http://christiansinsport.org.uk/support)**



YOUR SPORT STORIES

Reaching the world of sport for Christ is a huge task, and in the UK it's an incredible privilege to be able to walk alongside many different people looking to live and speak for Jesus within their sporting context.

Here's two sports stories from two Christians in the world of sport. We hope these encourage you as you support this work of reaching the sportspeople that exist on our doorstep with the good news of Jesus.

CHRISTIAN POUNTAIN



Christian Pountain is a secondary religious education teacher in Accrington and passionate about Judo, spending much of his time coaching alongside competing at Masters level, recently winning silver at the British Masters Championships. Christian leads the Blackburn Local Network and is part of the Sports Plus team running Giggleswick, our new camp in the North of England, this summer.

Tell us about your faith and sporting journey, and how did you become involved in Christians in Sport initially?

Faith and sport are central to my life, I teach R.E. in a Christian school and judo is my passion, but I love all sport, pretty much all my time is devoted to these two things and my family.

I came to Christ at school through an R.E. teacher, I'm so thankful to him for sharing Jesus with me. My parents then came to Christ years later and years apart from each other,

they're prominent in the community so people often wrongly assume they brought me up as a Christian when it was the other way round.

I started Judo age 5. I remember at my local leisure centre seeing the man who'd become my Judo instructor deal with some aggressive youths bothering the receptionist. He diffused the situation immediately with such nonchalance and that ignited my passion - I admired his level of skill.

My passion developed and as a teenager I was training 6 times a week and progressed to a high level. Judo is niche in the UK - we have 40,000 members of our Association when in France it's over 1 million and it's popular around the world. I remember a swimmer friend having to be in the pool twice a day starting at 4am just to compete nationally, when I trained much less but managed to medal in European competitions and nationally - I felt it was a lot easier by comparison!

My involvement in Christians in Sport started through the university group when I was at Bangor which was a brilliant support, for my brother the group at Lancaster university was influential in his coming to faith too. And I stayed in touch ever since from a distance, getting the various newsletters and praying. It was only during the pandemic and the start of the online prayer meetings that I stepped up my involvement.



What has it looked like to get back involved? What encouragements have there been so far?

Initially Ian Lancaster asked me to lead the Blackburn local network, and he didn't have to ask twice, I was really keen to fill the gap in my neck of the woods and try to bring Christian sportspeople together regularly, because there's so much opportunity here. Purely selfishly it's fabulous. I still compete at masters level, and it's encouraging to know people pray for me as I train and compete and look to share my faith. There's so much opportunity to witness in my club, it's a mixture of ethnicities and background, including asylum seekers and refugees, Judo is the common language that brings our community together. There's a couple of guys in the club who are strong in their Islamic faith, but wide open to the gospel and they've come to church with me. I'm so grateful to God for such an opportunity.

So the structure of the network meetings where we look at the Bible and pray intentionally together is so encouraging, as is the pattern of running a guest event every 12 months, for us it just works and the support from Christians in Sport helps us maintain that consistent pattern.

My hope is that the Network keeps building now we have a committed core group, these things need time and visibility across churches and local communities to build. I'm confident that we can stick to the model and will leave the growth up to God.

I'm also fortunate to work in a Christian school, in previous jobs I ran the risk of losing my job when sharing my faith whereas here it's much safer! Earlier in the year we were delighted to have the team from Christians in Sport to run some assemblies, lessons and sport at school, and the pupils engaged really well asking loads of questions.

Looking ahead to the summer and Giggleswick, what's your role on the camp, what are you excited about?

I was aware of Sports Plus for years, but have only been coming along for the last two years where I've been able to coach Judo as a second sport. You've got to experience Sports Plus first hand to understand it. The atmosphere, energy and great sport combine to make it a great place for young people to grow in their relationship with Jesus. To have Jesus front and centre and see how that fits with a love of sport, it's like heaven for me! I'm excited to bring that to the North of England for the first time. I really appreciate the work Christians in Sport put in to make this happen and I love being involved in a truly Bible-based ministry like this, I want to keep doing my bit to support and deliver the vision for as long as I can!



**Christian Won the Masters Category at the
2024 Scottish Open**

HEATHER LEWIS



Heather Lewis has worked in sports ministry for a number of years, including being Chaplain to the Welsh Women's Rugby Team and four years on the Christians in Sport staff team and now works at the Mental Health Foundation. Outside of her 9-5, she works as an elite athlete lifestyle advisor. Heather recently completed a master's degree researching Mental Health in elite sport – specifically within the Rugby World Cup context.

In April, we caught up with Heather to discuss work in elite sport and her research, and how her faith underpins her passion to work in this area.

Can you explain the role of an elite athlete lifestyle advisor?

Primarily it's being an impartial person in an athlete's life who's primary goal is their wellbeing. I help athletes pursue their own personal development, whether that's through education, or career planning post-retirement, to shorter term things like time management and goal setting.

Elite athletes generally have good support teams around them, but they're there for performance, so there's a tension between what they need when it comes to mental health and wellbeing, and what they need to perform. Coaches, sports psychs, and physios can't be impartial, they'll be involved in setting day to day training and things like selection, so athletes may hide weakness and vulnerability in these relationships.



My role is to be the one person in an athlete's life that doesn't need anything from them at all, I'm there to signpost resources they might find helpful and facilitate development as directed by them, keeping confidentiality. Of course, some performance teams have good cultures with strong mental health practice in place where athletes feel well cared for, but that's not commonplace and often these teams are first to recognise the need for a lifestyle advisor!

Tell us about your recent research, what did you find and what recommendations did you make?

I was able to talk to players and backroom staff who had been involved in a Rugby World Cup context from ten different countries with a range of experiences and levels of support.

I started by simply asking them what was most helpful for their mental health in a rugby context and continuing from there, covering the times when they felt most vulnerable, how they might advise themselves looking back and so on.

I was grateful that people who I'd never met before were willing to open up and to talk about their lived experience. Speaking to those who trained in a national team towards the World Cup but then didn't make the final squad was particularly interesting because they'd been through such a tough experience and yet were willing to share that with me.

And it didn't surprise me, because their motivation was to help those coming up behind them, many reflected that if what they shared could enable this research to help one person it would be worth it.

What was surprising to some degree was the lack of support. It wasn't a shock having worked in elite rugby before, but I was surprised at how under-resourced mental health support was. It was hardly being discussed at this level, this varied nation to nation but there's so much work to be done across the board.

It's obvious that there's still reluctance to speak openly about taking care of players' mental health within elite sport, it's nothing like the way we speak about physical health and wellbeing. And a performance environment with a high turnover of players and staff doesn't help get the conversation going. One of the most helpful comparisons drawn in my research findings was the work being done in concussion.

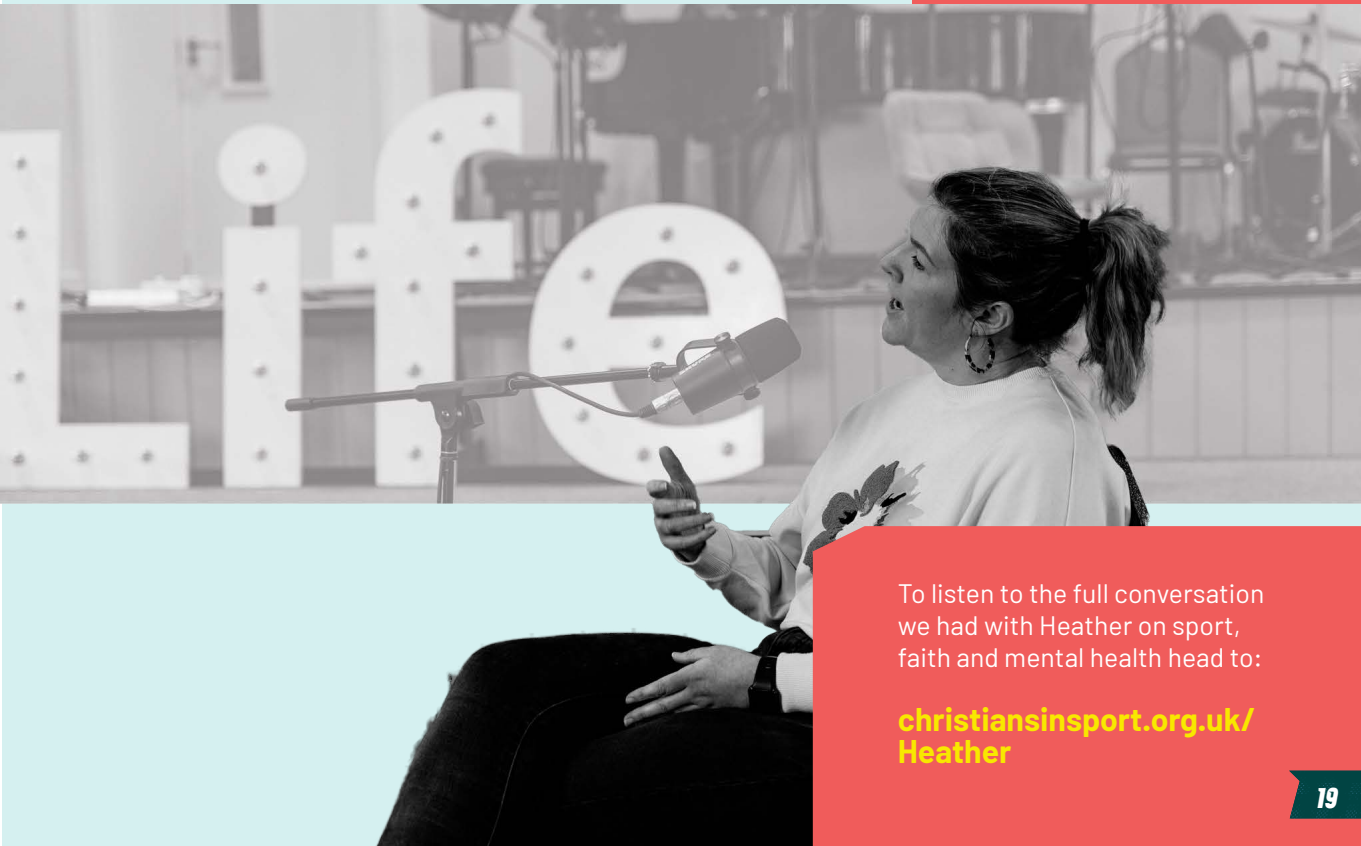
In a rugby context concussion is now taken a lot more seriously, with rigorous protocols used to protect players and good resources to educate players and staff. This is becoming the gold standard, and we'd do well to apply the same thinking to player care when it comes to mental health. There's a lot of low hanging fruit to be grasped in this area and I know it can be done because we've seen it already with the progress made around concussion.

How does your faith shape what you long to see in your work with elite athletes?

A lot of the time when I read things or I'm delivering training to people, I can see how the truth that's in the Bible is really brought to life. I'm often dealing with emotion, and relationships and the Bible is so rich on that. It's encouraging to see that Biblical truth about people matches up with scientific findings too – evidence in the space of mental health and wellbeing for elite athletes is so in tune with what the Bible says about identity and humanity.

And then personally, my faith and understanding of who I believe God is and how he's made me drives how I relate to people. I know I'm called to this area of work, and I have

a part to play. The Bible talks about speaking up for those with no voice, and I love that I get to do that as a job. It's encouraging to get to work with individuals in elite sport, to help them to feel heard and advocate for them when pressure and expectation are the dominant voices. But the pace is slow, I started doing chaplaincy work in 2000, so it's been a long time in this space, with plenty of setbacks, but it's taught me to trust in God and His faithfulness to bring things to fruition over time, I shouldn't always expect quick wins. It's a huge challenge but a privilege to take forward.



To listen to the full conversation we had with Heather on sport, faith and mental health head to:

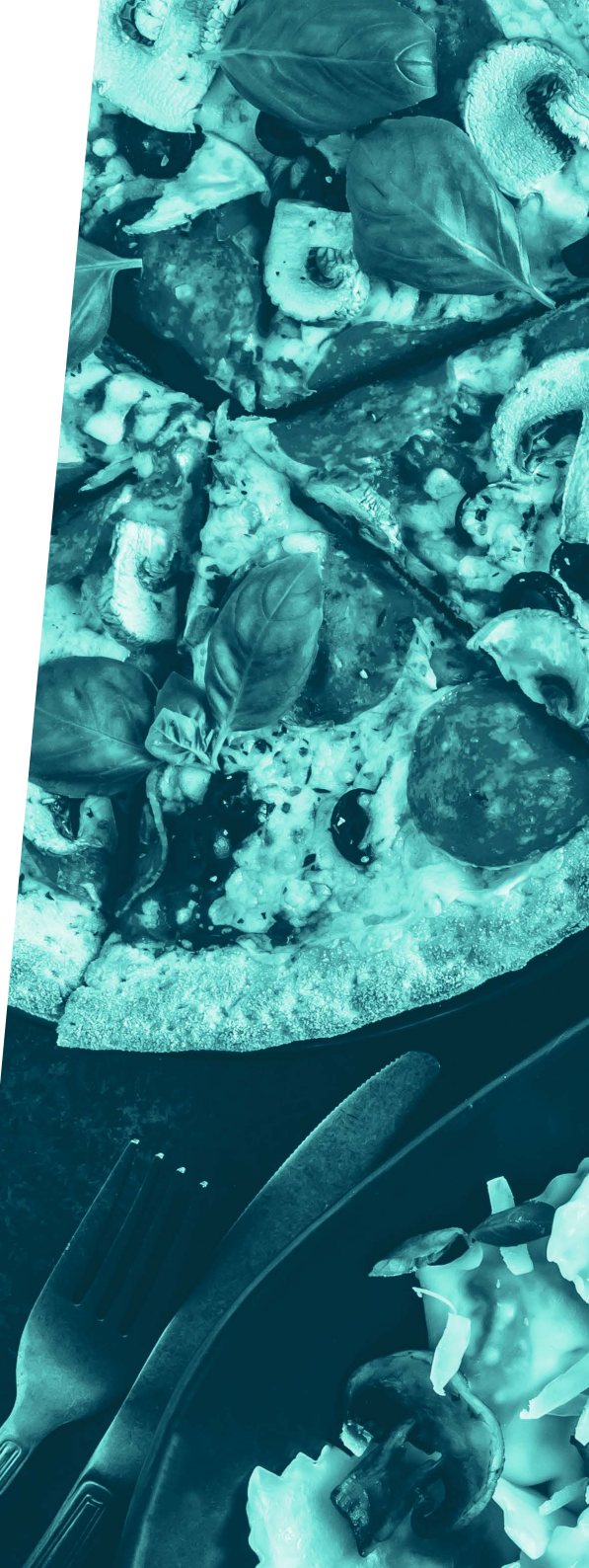
[christiansinsport.org.uk/
Heather](https://christiansinsport.org.uk/Heather)

A MEAL AND A MESSAGE

University years are undoubtedly formative. The combination of increased independence, critical thinking and practically limitless opportunity to socialise enable individuals the time and freedom to explore the questions of life.

Christians in Sport have been working with university students for over 50 years, supporting them to connect sport and faith and share Jesus with teammates. During this time the 'dialogue dinner' has become part of the staple diet when it comes to sharing faith. It's as simple as inviting friends over to share a meal together and explore the message of Jesus.

We sat down with three students who ran dialogue dinners in 2024, to get their reflections on their experiences.



Tell us where you're at university and what it's like to be a Christian in your team at the moment:

Matt: I'm a hockey goalkeeper at the University of Birmingham, it's been tough battling for selection, particularly getting dropped from a team in my first year which I found really difficult to take. This year I've loved playing in the second team, as a team we're often winning which is great, and off the pitch I've been able to build relationships with the boys and share Jesus despite being the only Christian in the club.

Sarah: I've been playing hockey in the 3rd team at the University of Dundee for three years. It's been a mixed bag, last year we won our league and got promoted, then half the team graduated, and we've been struggling in the league above this year. As a fresher I tried to hide my faith and struggled with fitting in when I was so obviously different, I'd miss socials and just say I was busy, so it was hard to bond with teammates when I was hiding such a big part of



Sarah (right) with a hockey teammate

my life. But joining the Christians in Sport university group and going to the New Year Training conference encouraged me to be more open and honest. This helped me to build relationships as the girls found out more about who I am and what I believe, and they were interested which wasn't what I expected.

Millie: I play basketball and study at the University of Southampton, currently in my 4th year so I feel like part of the furniture! I actually became a Christian in my first year and teammates saw me go through that change up close. Now we're blessed to have a number of Christians in the team and the club so it's normal to talk about faith. It's such a privileged position to be surrounded by teammates, both Christian and not yet Christian, who love and accept me for who I am. Having said that there have been challenges, including tensions with one of my old coaches, but generally it's really positive.

How did you find inviting teammates to a dialogue dinner? How did the evening go?

Sarah: I'm as last minute as it comes, but after three years putting it off I thought it was about time to get a dialogue dinner done! So, I sent a message to my team ahead of Easter inviting them to eat and chat about Christianity. Lots showed up, and together we explored a really simple model that explain the gospel through six 'windows'; creation, fall, judgment, cross, resurrection and choice. It was an easy way to get conversation flowing, there were surprisingly few awkward silences. I guess I shouldn't be surprised it went so deep, because I spend most days with these girls and they are actually interested in my life!

Matt: I stuck a message in the group chat, it's a big group so I was nervous that no one would respond. But we'd run a Sports Quiz just before Christmas and off the back of that I was able to share my intention to create a space to talk about faith with the boys

that came, so they were warmed up to respond when I sent the message out. So I hosted an evening where I cooked and we watched the rugby and then I started the discussion by asking the boys what concepts or words they associated with Christianity to explore their ideas, we had about an hour of chat off the back of that.

Millie: We also ran a Sports Quiz, and I invited guests to the dinner as a follow up to continue conversations. I was really nervous ahead of it, I needed a long coffee with Laura from the Christians in Sport team to work through that! Eight came round and we started with Laura asking me why I was a Christian and how that came about, and I shared my testimony. Then we had time for questions, continuing from the quiz and I asked my friends to share their thoughts on faith too.

What happened after your dinners? Did conversation around faith continue?

Matt: It has been tricky committing time, I'd love to spend more time with each of the boys, but I've



Matt in action for his Hockey Club

managed to regularly meet to read the Bible with one of the lads, and others know this is going on which I think is a good thing. I'm graduating this year so I'm conscious that this context won't last forever. I'm planning to do a barbecue at the end of the year and end my time at uni on a good note, trusting God will remain at work as we move away from each other.

Sarah: I held my dinner at the end of the season, so it's been hard to stay in touch with all the girls with no training or matches. There's been some good chat continuing with those I'm on a course with, so I'm trying to keep in touch over the summer and pick up where we left off at the start of next term.



Millie during a basketball game

Millie: After the dinner I offered out a weekly Bible study to the girls, I started a group chat called 'chats on a Wednesday' where we'd read together and then afterwards there was an open invite to my church's student night. A couple of girls have now been to church a few times now which is incredible. My hope is that this seed that's been planted would take hold in their lives and they'll come to faith, whether I get to see it or not.



What advice would you give to other students looking to share Jesus over dinner with their sports friends?

Millie: Don't be tempted to put all your teammates in the same box. They're all human just like you are, all made different and interesting, and they're interested in you too as a friend and teammate. Everyone has questions when you get to know them and often are so much more open than you realise. So, it might be an easier ask than you think.

Sarah: Just do it! I chickened out of hosting a dinner last year because I was too scared. But, after a reunion social where girls who've graduated came back, it struck me that I'd spent so much time with these girls but never once shared the gospel with them. It was motivation to go for it this year. So do it, and pray what you talk about stays with your guests.

Matt: Get a slow cooker – you won't regret it! More seriously pray, remember you rely on God. It's easy to feel the pressure is on you, but it's not our job to change people, God does that. So, pray and go and do it. You'll be surprised about how many people are open to hearing more about Jesus.

Stories like these are deeply encouraging and show why we must remain committed to training and equipping students to reach the world of university sport for Christ. This context provides rich opportunity for students to enjoy working hard at their sporting talent and form deep relationships which enable authentic and effective witness.

University remains a pivotal time in the faith journey of many Christians, and a brilliant setting for training future leaders. It's a joy and a privilege to support Christian students as they love and serve their teammates and boldly step out in faith to proclaim the gospel.

Heading to uni or know somebody who is? Join now at

[christiansinsport.org.uk/
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MENTORS FOR THE FUTURE

WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE TO MAKE DISCIPLES IN SPORT FOR YOU IN BARCELONA AT THE MOMENT?

I retired recently, so I'm transitioning from playing to coaching and a new challenge. Throughout my career in women's football particularly I've always been the only Christian in teams where LGBT culture has a loud voice which goes against my Christian world view. It's always been a temptation to hide my thoughts. But over my career this challenge enabled me to grow in boldness to share my view more openly and gently encourage others to consider what the Bible says about sexuality.

That feeling of isolation I had is a challenge for many sportspeople. We're working to connect Christian athletes together across Barcelona to support each other, creating spaces where we can share and pray together. Our group is growing, with athletes from football, basketball, volleyball and a range of individual sports which is exciting.

Last year I was on the final pilot of the MDP and I learned so much throughout that year, going deeper into the Bible and exploring questions around competitiveness, and sporting culture, including a research project which really helped deepen my understanding. It's so exciting now to be able to coach on the MDP knowing I gained so much from it.

In November 2023 the Mentor Development Programme (MDP) was launched live in Malta, alongside a pattern of play for sports ministry.

Nearly a year in, the MDP is being implemented through multiple cohorts in big regions around the world to train new leaders through a mixture of independent and peer group learning in person and online.

One of the attendees was Jessie Starrenburg, a football and futsal player, who is a coach on this year's European MDP. We caught up with Jessie, who works for Athletes in Action in Barcelona, to find out more about her ministry within sport, and her work to train leaders across Europe.



WHAT ROLE HAVE MENTORS PLAYED IN YOUR JOURNEY, AND HOW YOU SEE YOURSELF PLAYING THAT ROLE?

For a long time when I was playing I didn't have any close mentors, I didn't know of any Christians in competitive sport. I had so many questions about winning and performance as a younger player, and I found it really hard to see how competitiveness fits with what the Bible said. Getting involved with Athletes in Action on their summer mission trips was the first time I was able to connect with Christians with experience in the world of sport, and to be able to start working through these questions.

It's helped me understand the impact of trained mentors, sportspeople really benefit from having those around them with practical experience of putting sport and faith together. They bring perspective to those grappling with tough questions, for me particularly those questions were around performance. My aim as a coach on the MDP is to work to train new mentors to keep doing this work with sportspeople, to build sustainable ministry that equips sportspeople for generations to come. It's so important to train mentors in this way because each mentor can have such a far-reaching impact.

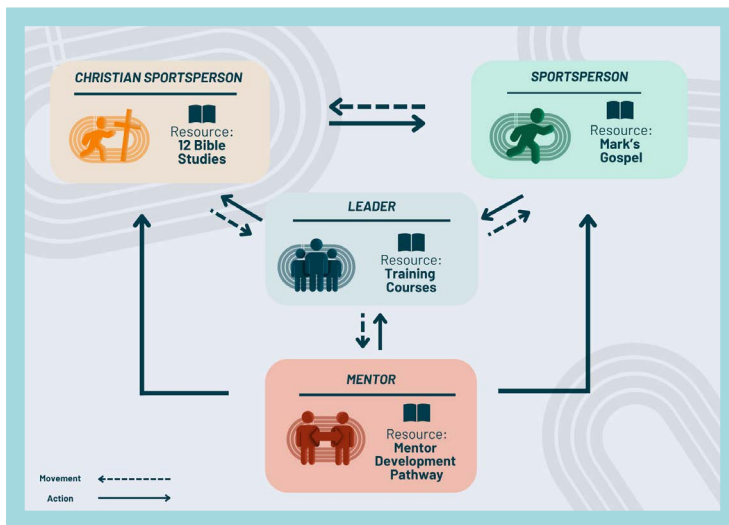
YOU RECENTLY GATHERED WITH THIS YEAR'S EUROPEAN MDP COHORT IN PORTUGAL, WHAT DID YOU GET UP TO?

I delivered sessions on the pattern of play which is a great tool for understanding where sportspeople are on their journey of faith and is interlinked with great resources. For example, in my role I'm working through the MDP to train leaders to become mentors, whilst also using the Mark's Gospel studies in my every day to help athletes explore faith.

It's great to work with the MDP participants to build understanding of the framework and how all the different resources fit in. It's really visual which helps you to ground things that were in your mind, the common language is really helpful, it's easy to know where to go to help different people and works really well in the real world.

Working through this in person is powerful as you hear stories and reflections from the year so far, and it's so exciting to see how this will lead to multiplication of ministry across Europe and the world in time as we each play our roles .

It's exciting for Christians in Sport to collaborate with people and organisations across the world on such a significant global project. In-person gatherings like those in Malta and Portugal over the last 12 months provide wonderful opportunities to reflect and learn from those around the world that share the same vision - to reach the whole world of sport with the good news of Christ.



**Making disciples in competitive and elite sport:
The "Pattern of Play" diagram**

WE'RE OFF TO WEMBLEY



At the end of 2023, the Football Association, as part of its Faith and Football series, gathered coaches, players and staff involved in professional football to explore how sport and faith connect at the Bobby Moore Suite in Wembley Stadium, with over 500 attending.

Hosted by Adrian Chiles, the event involved a keynote speech from our director Graham Daniels, exploring the growth of Christians involved in the game and the difference faith in Jesus makes to those involved. Those interviewed included Sky Sports Presenter Simon Thomas, Former Lioness Rachel Yankey and Ballers in God founder John Bostock as well as a scout from Manchester United, a chaplain in the women's game and the Head of Wellbeing at the PFA.

It was a privilege to enjoy ending the day with a service on the Wembley pitch side with a Salvation Army band, gospel choir and carols. The afternoon was produced by Michael Wakelin, exec chair of the Religion Media Centre who said: "The tie-up between Christianity and football runs deep, going right back to the origin of the club game in England. It's important not to lose sight of the early pioneers who regarded football as a great way of creating communities and having fun. The way the FA is taking the opportunity to revisit and celebrate football's links with the Christian faith is very encouraging."

At Christians in Sport, it is a privilege to support a number of players, coaches and support staff across professional football including through regular 1-2-1 and group Bible studies. We're thankful to God for opportunities such as this

to speak openly and celebrate the impact of Christianity in the professional game, and we're encouraged to see our work in this sporting context recognised in such a way.

"THE TIE-UP BETWEEN CHRISTIANITY AND FOOTBALL RUNS DEEP, GOING RIGHT BACK TO THE ORIGIN OF THE CLUB GAME IN ENGLAND. IT'S IMPORTANT NOT TO LOSE SIGHT OF THE EARLY PIONEERS WHO REGARDED FOOTBALL AS A GREAT WAY OF CREATING COMMUNITIES AND HAVING FUN. THE WAY THE FA IS TAKING THE OPPORTUNITY TO REVISIT AND CELEBRATE FOOTBALL'S LINKS WITH THE CHRISTIAN FAITH IS VERY ENCOURAGING."

As we look ahead to the 24/25 season, we'll be walking alongside players, coaches and staff through highs and lows in a sporting context that can be cutthroat, will you pray with us that Christians in professional football will grow in their love for Jesus? Will you pray they'd find joy in worshipping him as they play and work and be bold in sharing faith where there is opportunity.



HOW DO I HELP MY CHILD DEAL WITH DISAPPOINTMENT IN SPORT?

"In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory, and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed." 1 Peter 1v6-7

Disappointment is a real thing! It is a gut-wrenching, all-consuming monster that can appear at any moment and overwhelm your child. It comes with the usual stuff in sport (a defeat, missing out on team selection, an injury) but also in the subtle (a discouraging word from a teammate, a comment from a coach, unhappy with an area of performance you're unaware of).

If you're in the business of parenting young performance athletes, you need to be ready to support your child, and yourself, through disappointment.

Peter writes to Christians who have been scattered throughout the area due to persecution. Let's pull out three things in these verses that can help us face disappointment.

1 HE IS HONEST ABOUT THEIR CURRENT SITUATION

"...though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials."

Perhaps a danger for parents is an underlying desire for their children to always be happy. So, when disappointments come you naturally and quickly want them to move on and be positive.

Peter recognises the grief, the trials, the disappointment. He calls it out and he doesn't hide it or pretend it's not there.

What would be helpful for your child here? Maybe, that you don't overlook disappointment. That you don't pretend it's not there and come out with glib comments like 'don't worry' or 'it will all work out'. How can you be sensitive and aware of disappointment – the obvious and the subtle – we all need the Spirit's help here. It's not wrong to feel disappointed, but how you respond to it is important.





2 HE SEES A BIGGER PICTURE

"...These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith-of greater worth than gold"

Peter points to the fact that trials have a purpose - God uses trials and disappointments to build our trust in Him. This might be most relevant for parents and guardians. The disappointments your child faces and the way they respond and treat you in those moments can be a real test.

Peter says that your faith in the Lord Jesus is the most important thing, of greater value than gold. The refining process isn't always easy, it can be fiery! Could you encourage your child to see that the highs and lows, the ups and downs are all wonderful opportunities to grow our faith in the one who holds us tightly?

3 HE POINTS TO A GREATER OUTCOME

"...may result in praise, glory, and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed."

We were designed to praise God and give him glory. When we do this, we're satisfied in the moment and King Jesus is honoured when He returns again. Peter points to a time when Jesus is coming back. A time when all disappointment in sport and life will be washed away. A time when a stumbling faith in those toughest moments of parenting will result in the honour of Jesus. He will turn to you and those who trust in Him and say, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

When those tough moments of disappointment for you and your child come, however hard, Peter says keep trusting in Him, for he'll never ever let you down.



QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. How do you currently respond to your child's disappointment?
2. How have these verses helped you to think differently about disappointment?
3. In a period of disappointment, what are some helpful and not helpful things to say to your child?

4 WAYS TO PRAY FOR...

ELITE SPORTSPEOPLE AT MAJOR SPORTING EVENTS

Being an elite athlete is a privilege that only a very select few experience.

You might sit down and watch the Olympics and think what an incredible lifestyle it is, to compete to be the best in the world, or even in history. Yet, if you know an athlete at the pinnacle of their sport, you'll know it's not plain sailing. In many sports athletes outside of the very top few can struggle to make a living, spend next to no time at home, and those who follow Jesus may feel isolated from Church family often – and this is true even when it's going well! Dark days of injury, failure and disappointment also feature in nearly every top athlete's career.

So, whether you're up close to those in the top echelons of sport, or you're simply sitting down to watch the Olympics this summer, here's four ways to pray for elite athletes.

1 PRAY FOR JOY

Elite sport places serious pressure on an athlete's identity as they experience uncertainty and fear in the build up to competition, and the extreme highs of victory or crushing disappointment of defeat after the event. Pray that Christian athletes would know their identity is based on Christ's work, and not dependent on success or failure, and that this security would enable them to compete with joy on the world stage.

2 PRAY FOR CONNECTION

For those in tour sports like athletics, tennis and golf, most of every year is spent travelling and those building up to major events will spend weeks away from home training and competing. Pray for Christians to feel connected with Christian community as they travel. Pray that church leaders, Christian friends and organisations including Christians in Sport would offer practical support to enable this.

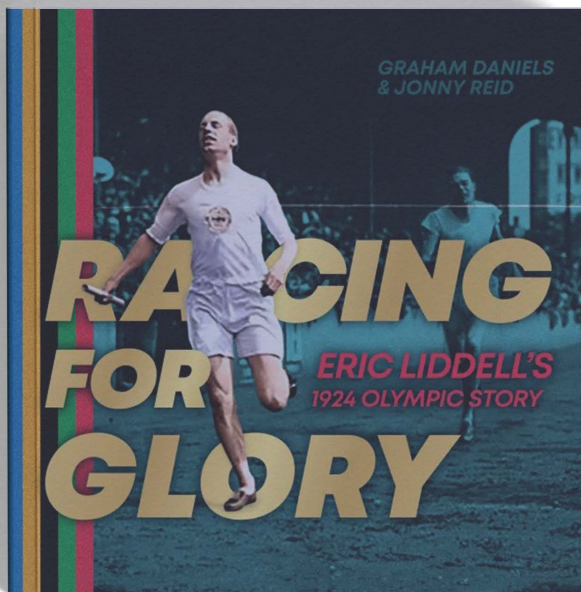
3 PRAY FOR OPPORTUNITY

Top level athletes often build strong and close relationships with their competitors, particularly those on tour sports who compete against each other frequently. Pray for Christian athletes as they seek to live and speak for Jesus among their peers, pray that God would open doors for them to share their faith with those they train with and compete against.

4 PRAY FOR CHURCHES

Elite sport rarely conforms to the pattern of a working week and weekends off and athletes may find it challenging to attend a regular Sunday service. Pray for athletes in this situation to prioritise time with Church family, be it on Sunday or in the week, and pray for Church leaders to be understanding in order to disciple elite athletes within their church families well.

HOLD OUT THE GOSPEL DURING THIS SUMMER OF SPORT.



One hundred years ago, all eyes were on Paris for the 1924 Olympic Games.

Among the world's finest athletes stood sprinter Eric Liddell of Great Britain. But, holding true to his convictions, he chose not to enter his best race – the 100 metres – switching to the 400 metres and winning gold.

This brief biography explores Liddell's extraordinary life and how his faith in Jesus motivated everything he did.

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