

The games we play: March Madness, otherwise known as Lent

by [L. Gregory Jones](#) in the [April 6, 2004](#) issue

The Delta Airlines *Sky* magazine asked its readers, “Are we soccer crazy? Are children spending too much time playing and are adults spending too much time ferrying them to and from their games?” The story included anecdotal evidence of families whose lives were shaped by the time and travel demands of soccer.

More revealing than the original anecdotes, however, were the letters the story generated. One couple said yes, we are soccer crazy. Another compared the soccer phenomenon to Roman Coliseum games and the decline of the Roman Empire. But most of the letters defended the importance of sports in general, and soccer in particular, as part of the shaping of a good life.

One letter writer noted that “there is too little soccer, not too much.” Another observed, “There is nothing better than athletics, team sports and focused competition to help young minds and bodies grow into well-rounded, productive young men and women.”

I do not know whether this writer, who called herself “soccermom,” is a Christian. But it would not surprise me if she is, for I have heard similar views expressed by churchpeople. Indeed, I have found myself parenting as if her view were the correct one. I too have often acted as though there were nothing better for young kids than athletics, team sports and focused competition.

When our children were younger, my wife and I willingly and happily drove them to soccer practices and games several times a week. When one of them developed a passion for the sport, we drove all around the state on weekends to go to games and tournaments.

Yet we lacked the same passion for taking them to church activities. This came to a head when our oldest child was ready for confirmation. The confirmation class was going to meet every week for several months, and we thought: what a burden it

would be!

Then it dawned on me (through my wife's misgivings) that we were unwittingly suggesting to ourselves and to our kids that it is more important and interesting to learn how to play soccer than it is to learn how to live as a Christian. We were living as if soccer were more challenging than faithful Christian living.

As the *Sky* story suggested, one of the factors affecting us is that we live in a culture that focuses significant attention on sports—from young children's activities to the spectator sports at the college and professional levels. And part of the problem lies within churches. Have we challenged ourselves and our youth to recognize what is at stake in learning a Christian way of life? One of the reasons many kids don't want to participate in church activities, including confirmation, is that often not much happens.

In the catechetical practices of the third- and fourth- century church, it took on average of two years of involvement before a person was ready for baptism. During this time, inquirers were assigned mentors who would guide them in learning how to live, think and feel as Christians. There was a sense of adventure. When candidates were ready for baptism, they would enter an intensive Lenten journey of study, discipleship and questioning to prepare them for an Easter baptism. Nothing was more important.

We dare not romanticize the church's life during this period. In a sermon preached to new Christians, Augustine warned them that he was more worried about the influence of lazy Christians than about the assumptions and practices of a pagan culture.

But we can glean wisdom from early catechetical practices for reflecting on what is at stake in teaching people how to live faithfully as Christians. This is true whether those practices are found in the early church or in various contemporary models (including the Roman Catholic Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults).

Such wisdom points to the centrality of formation—of shaping practices and habits that help us learn how to think, feel and live as Christians. It points to the importance of conveying that something significant is at stake—that the Christian life is an adventure worth the investment of our time, our money and ourselves. It points to the wisdom of turning to mentors, and of becoming mentors ourselves in service to others.

When kids discover Christian life as an adventure—through resources such as *Way to Live* (edited by Dorothy C. Bass and Don C. Richter), youth academies of Christian formation, or youth programs that make a claim on their lives—kids often discover that there is nothing better or more life-giving. We have seen it happen in our kids' lives, and in the lives of their friends.

Recently I visited with a man who is a leader in his church and in the wider community. He complained about a lack of passion and vision in his church. I said I thought that one of our problems is that too many of us unwittingly convey to our kids that it is more important and more challenging to learn how to play soccer than it is to learn how to follow Christ. He turned to me, incredulous, and started telling me about all of the benefits of team sports. He added that he thought it was “unreasonable” to expect parents to have as much time for confirmation as they have for soccer or basketball.

That conversation is worth thinking about as we journey through a season that is sometimes called Lent, and at other times is known as March Madness.