The Cleveland Cavaliers (the city's professional basketball team) won the world championship last week by defeating the Golden State Warriors on their home turf in game 7 of the finals. This victory is memorable for several reasons.

First, the Cavs came from a 3-1 deficit to win. No other team in NBA history had done this. Secondly, this is Cleveland's first national championship in any sport since 1964. The city has waited 52 years for a national title. And thirdly, the star player for Cleveland and "native son," LeBron James, came back to play for the Cavs two years ago, promising to bring a championship to Cleveland. Obviously, he fulfilled his promise—with an incredible display of athleticism, with extremely talented teammates, and with a great rookie coach.

Cleveland fans celebrated this championship en masse. The night of the final game, tens of thousands of fans gathered in the streets of downtown Cleveland to cheer their beloved team. How refreshing it was to see huge mobs of people swarming the streets and NOT fighting each other or the police, but hugging and high-fiving each other—including total strangers. The people were even high-fiving the police! The next day the police reported making only 5 arrests during the massive celebration—all for minor infractions. And on Wednesday 1.3 million people swarmed into downtown...
Cleveland for the team’s victory parade. They packed the streets, hung out from windows, and even climbed onto rooftops to cheer their championship team.

All of this raises the question for me: Do sports support spirituality or do they distract from spirituality. My answer: It all depends.

If you Google “sports and spirituality” or “sports and religion” (as I did) thousands of books and articles come up. Some writers see sports (especially in the U.S.) as religion’s greatest threat. In fact some say our sports have become our new religion. They maintain that our sports stadiums are our new great cathedrals. Sports are similar to religion, they say, in so far as they demand a regular gathering together of people, a similar allegiance, certain acts of devotion (like buying sports team paraphernalia), and even specific rituals such as cheers and “pilgrimages” to sports arenas or halls of fame.

But sports support values that spirituality also supports. Sports encourage personal discipline. They nurture camaraderie—whether we are participating in sports or watching them. Sports teach us how to deal with both winning and losing. Sports also underscore the value of focusing attention. Just watch the golfer attempting a twelve foot putt or that running back clutching the football and driving toward that goal line. Isn’t the focusing of attention a prerequisite for prayer and for deeds of compassion?

Some psychologists say participating in or watching sports is one way of generating a state we call “being in the flow.” It’s really a form of transcendence where our attention is completely absorbed and our awareness of self and our surroundings fade away. Being “in the zone” is not unlike a person rapt in prayer and devotion. Sports also make individuals feel that they belong to something bigger than themselves. Ask any Cleveland fan as they watched...
their team (in person or via TV) returning from California with the championship trophy. Or when they experienced that gigantic victory parade for their team.

What are your thoughts on this topic? What role, for example, do sports play in your personal life? What positive or negative impact do sports have on contemporary life where you live? Do you think sports have become our new religion?

Since I am a Cleveland Cavaliers’ fan, my heart is filled with gratitude for our national championship. That’s one reason I chose a simple thanksgiving song for today, entitled “Give Thanks.”

Any further thoughts?

Tagged as: can sports support religion?, sports and religion, sports and spirituality
The big question here in my mind is “Does our Lord or his Blessed Mother care??”

Kathleen  June 27, 2016 at 5:33 am

Sr. Melanie,

I was in Ohio and it was such a wonderful event to see the Cavs win the championship. Can we bring that same ethos to the Church and faith?

Championships are fleeting but the discipline of prayer will last forever. Maybe sport is good way to explain our pilgrimage to God.

Kathleen

Mary Nolan  June 27, 2016 at 9:39 am

Yes. Emmett He cares because he created us, loves us and shares our joys as well as our sorrows...as does His mother. 😊

Mary Schneider  June 27, 2016 at 10:12 am

I immediately thought of you, Sr Melannie, when the Cavs won (you and Fr. James McKarns), and joined in rejoicing this victory. I do not follow many sports, but I DO follow Christ. There are indeed many blessed similarities but only one results in salvation for eternity.

Sunnie Poplar  June 27, 2016 at 10:54 am

Have not been a sports fan for years and only watched the championship game because my kids shamed me into it. It was a joyous event until Lebron chose
to use totally inappropriate language on tv with millions of kids listening. Very few tv commentators chose to even mention that flaw.

Joanne Bennardo  June 27, 2016 at 11:15 am

As I watched the victorious events of last week unfold on local Cleveland TV, the theme of waiting seemed to reoccur. Fans waited in many lines: for tickets, in airports, in sporting good stores, awaiting the players to deplane in Cleveland Monday morning, awaiting the parade to begin on Wednesday morning, and awaiting RTA public transportation. The wait the fans spoke of was a wait of many hours. One woman proudly waited at Dick’s three hours before the store opened to purchase a championship shirt.

Waiting is a quality that hopeful people possess. Thankfully, the hope of the fans was realized. But in viewing all the celebration, I did wonder, as you did, Sister, whether sports has replaced religion.

But although one doesn’t see lines weaving endlessly outside churches, I think our Christian message remains a constant one of watchful hope-filled waiting. Indeed, God is good, and congratulations to the Cavs fans.

Heather Wilson  June 27, 2016 at 11:24 am

Sports offers us a modern take on the morality play nearly every day. It’s a great way to discuss right and wrong and values with our 15 year old!

Sr. Renetta  June 27, 2016 at 12:45 pm

When we celebrate together we are celebrating the One Who Made Us! To witness the joy of millions of people who set aside any and all differences is a “miracle” in itself.

Michael Rucker  June 29, 2016 at 12:14 pm
Well said, sister. Our 15 year old’s heart and mind find a clear focus when it comes to sports, especially basketball. It means much more to him than who wins the game. He studies, facebooks, instagrams the players. He follows their way of being on and off the court, their support or betrayal of one another, their family stories…. He learns how to endure defeat, how to get back up, how to win without gloating. Sports is the stage where life makes sense to him right now. And….this is partly tongue in cheek. “God gave us sports so men would have something to talk about.” Too often, too true. But you’ve have joined the conversation, sister. Thank you.

Jean Canatsey  June 27, 2016 at 12:58 pm

I think there definitely are similarities between sports and religion but I remember building Mass times around game times when our children were involved in sports. I sometimes wonder, “If we had been forced to choose, would sports have come first?” We once had a grandson who was going to RCIA with his wife and stopped going because it interfered with watching Sunday evening football. Sports WAS his religion. In retrospect, I think that maybe watching sports on TV is more of an addiction than a communal experience as he was also addicted to drugs and eventually hung himself.

Karen  June 27, 2016 at 1:07 pm

I admit it: I was born without a sports gene. When I see or hear about professional sports, I see players who are paid too much, fans who pay too much for tickets and paraphernalia when they should be saving for their kids future or for retirement, and people who invest a huge amount of attention and energy in what is just a money machine (professional sports) masquerading as a “civic endeavor”. That being said, I do enjoy watching the Olympics and I do see the parallels that Sr Melannie points out. I marvel at how athletes combine God-given talents with drive and dedication to rise to the top of their field. I salute them for their achievements and I always think of the countless other people who have dedicated themselves to that one athlete’s success. I envy the athletes as well. I think: How well would WE ALL do in our own careers if we had a whole team of people working to enable us to WIN?
Re: The Cavs win ... I think the peaceful celebration of 1.3M people was more significant than the win. It gives me hope for humanity.

---

Chris Keil  June 27, 2016 at 3:46 pm

Not much of a sports fan now, although I had my share of football and baseball when I lived in Cleveland.
I did draw a analogy with one a few of my hobbies though.... singing/acting in community theatre. I love it and although I may be busy and stretched, I often tell people that it is the one place where I am totally distracted from reality and the trials of everyday life. There is camaraderie and working toward a common goal. Congratulations on the win.........

---

Pam  June 27, 2016 at 4:21 pm

I was sorry to see you compare sports and religion. I am not a big sports fan. Living in St. Louis, MO my whole life, I always enjoy hearing anything about the Cardinals. And, I love playing games of all kinds. However, major league sports always seem to focus on the bottom line...the money being made. When I say things like, "it's only a game" when referring to a lose, I am immediately perceived as a less-than-perfect fan. While you did a good job of spinning words like focus and camaraderie to connect these two topics, I think it cheapens the idea of religious celebrations. I miss the people on Sunday who said they couldn't come to Mass because they had tickets for the game. I usually appreciate your thoughts, but this one bothered me.

---

Emmett McMahon  June 27, 2016 at 11:24 pm

Wow, I was surprised at the number of comments that I received that included the Cleveland Cavs, I was just a surprised to read in the local San Diego sports news about them and our local teams.  
https://boltbeat.com/2016/06/25/san-diego-has-become-most-tortured-sports-city/
Susan Bachner  June 28, 2016 at 8:23 am

My husband and I run a religious education program for our parish of 1,000 plus students. Sports has become a religion for those parents whose children belong to teams, i.e. parish, school or organized elite teams. I cannot tell you how many parents will inform me that their child will not be in class for x-number of days because of games or practice. Don’t get me wrong, I love our Pittsburgh Penguins and were thrilled to watch (on TV) the Stanley Cup playoffs. I am just saddened that religion takes a back seat to signing your child up for a team. Our son and daughter were not involved in sports while in school and maybe I am too hard on these parents. Not sure what others feel.

Beverly Palumbo, RSM  June 28, 2016 at 10:29 am

Excellent blog insights….thanks…we have a long history in our world of sports events/some in the name of religious belief that included human sacrifice…I am glad we progressed beyond that style for the civilized world…but, we need to gather, to belong, to support common values…we continue to work it out in a variety of ways…cheering, protesting but hopefully moving deeper into care for the other…God bless

Susan  June 30, 2016 at 7:38 am

I feel you brought up an excellent topic. Sports are a huge part of our American culture! It is worthwhile for us to consider the impact it has on us as a people and a church community.
SISTERS OF NOTRE DAME WITNESS DAILY TO GOD'S GOODNESS AND PROVIDENT CARE.