



## *Sharing the Good News!*

Penn Northeast Conference of the United Church of Christ

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### **Faith IN Sports or Faith AND Sports?**

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I have a confession to make...on Sundays I often worship idols! I watch NFL football as much as I am able to; not only Sundays, but on Monday and Thursday nights too. It is because of my participation in "idol worship" that I was led to buy a book about faith, spirituality, and sports.

Over my years of football watching I have often seen the John 3:16 sign appear among the fans in a stadium. I never investigated its origin but often wondered why the sign appeared. I have found out how it came to be.

In the late 1970s a man named Rollen Stewart, known as "Rockin Rollen," would don a rainbow colored wig and attend many major sports events. He became somewhat of a minor TV celebrity. His motivation for appearing at the events was his desire for fame and fortune. In 1980, after a conversion experience Stewart found Christ and soon the John 3:16 sign became part of his attire. Because of the huge amount of donations he received, his "jumbotron evangelism" was now in front of millions of spectators at many and every kind of major sporting event. Soon the rainbow wig disappeared and just the John 3:16 sign remained. After a series of blunders and antics on his part, he found himself homeless, rejected, and angry. He began to engage in doomsday prophecy and apocalyptic speeches, became even further rejected and in serious trouble with the law. He is currently in jail serving three life sentences. His fame and it would seem his commitment to his faith ended in 1992!

Those John 3:16 signs continue to appear in stadiums. I now wonder if people rush to dust off their Bibles, open it, look up the verse, receive

spiritual enlightenment and ultimately decide to get down on their knees rather than "taking a knee."

One Sunday night I was watching football and heard broadcaster Al Michaels call the new head coach of the Colts, Jim Caldwell, the "anointed one." That really got my attention!!! Michaels went on to explain why that "title" was given to Caldwell. Caldwell was groomed and pre-selected for the job of head coach as soon as his predecessor Tony Dungy announced during last season his intention to possibly retire.

*Is there truly a valid and real connection between faith, spirituality, religion, and sports?*

In sports there are teams with religious names...The Saints; there are sayings with religious connotations...the Hail Mary pass. In sports as in religion and faith there are themes of bad guys vs. good guys, the underdog, the outcast, perseverance, ritual, tradition, unity, miracles, wonders, and integrity. There's also competitiveness, who's the greatest of them all, obsessions and idolatry. There is the hope of the fans even if their team has not won a game, a title, or a playoff spot in years and they hang on tenaciously with faith in their team!

Perhaps the Apostle Paul was really onto something not just for the folks in the church of Corinth, but for us as well, as he used analogies and sports related language...running the race, winning the prize, persevering, receiving the reward (of an imperishable wreath), and exercising self control (1 Corinthians 9:24-27). What is the "prize" we hope to receive, how do we train to run the race, are the fruit of the Spirit evident in our lives as we practice our faith in all areas of life, and not in some contest or in one venue or stadium? If you, like I, desire to further explore the relationship between faith, spirituality, and sports then pick up a copy of *Kneeling in the End Zone: Spiritual Lessons from the World of Sports*. It is available from Pilgrim Press.

*Journeying through another season of my faith and of football too...Nancy*