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At no other time in history has the interest and devotion to sports been as high as it is today, especially in the United States. Oh, there may have been fans more rabid or participants more devoted at various times in the past, for various events, but on the whole, more people are now enjoying some form of athletic activity than ever before.

The attraction reaches a high point in the fall and spring of the year when many of the most popular sports overlap. In the crisp autumn air, for instance, football is underway, baseball play-offs and basketball are beginning, hunting and fishing are at their best, and most other activities, from golf to tennis, continue to attract attention.

For the most part this is good. For the fans it provides exciting entertainment. Some sports, such as football, are great rituals, adding to community life. And for the participants, in all sports, it means added self-discipline and confidence, increased physical skill, and the healthy exercise of competitive spirit.

But lately participants have set themselves up as some sort of "gods". Their demands have become ridiculous, their behavior disgusting, and their stamina very weak. I can recall when football players played 60 minutes in a game. And it's unbelievable when the many "fat cats" in baseball can't wait until All Star break to get some much needed rest. I am sure many of us participated in many sports events after having worked 8 and 10 hours a day, just for the pleasure and fun it gave us to compete in a recreational sport with our fellow man.

Now, recreational sports have been with us for a long time. And I am sure the good Lord has always been an advocate of physical as well as spiritual strength, of a healthy body as well as a sound mind. In this sense, the interest in sports has been good for the nations, or for that matter good for the world.

But, as in all good things, there is a need for reasonable limits and responsibility in our recreational pursuits, for both fans and participants. If some unknowing visitor came to the United States between September and April, he could easily conclude that the national "religion" is football or basketball. And unfortunately, they have in some cases become the only "worship" service many people attend.

I guess you could carry this analogy one step further. You could say: Sports display every characteristic of a formal, thriving religion movement. It has its gods (super-star athletes) it has its disciples (the agents, who spread their greatness) it has its scribes (the sports writers and sportscasters) it has its houses of worship (the Astrodome and Superdome and other facilities that rival anything ever constructed to house traditional worship services). And sports has one other feature that traditional religion seems to have lost a long time ago in our American society...massive throngs of highly vocal, true believers.

No, there is nothing wrong with sports. It has provided some of the great enjoyments of life. But it will only do so for as long as the participants and the spectators consider and maintain their perspective, and not let it replace our "religion".

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