

# National Sports Sunday

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Date: 10 May 2026

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Well, as I said, today is National Sports Sunday, and as part of that we're going to look back at the chapter that we read. Let me read verse 16. We do not lose heart, though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. The aim of Sports Chaplain, National Sports Sunday, is that Sports Chaplaincy UK is encouraging churches to take the opportunity to celebrate, to encourage, and to pray for the sporting connections that exist all across the communities in the United Kingdom, and it's a great privilege today for us to be part of that.

And as we do that, just as we start, there's two big things that I want us to recognize. The first is that sports makes a massively positive contribution to our communities, and that happens in loads of different ways. There's the obvious benefits of being healthy and active, getting exercise. It's also a wonderful opportunity, especially for children through sports, but also for adults. Sports brings the opportunity for people to learn new things, to develop new skills, to hone their abilities. And sport's incredibly powerful in terms of the way in which it can bring people together. And there's a sense of connection and bond in sport that actually is really quite unique and special. So first big thing I want to recognize is that sport makes a massively positive contribution to our community. Second big thing I want us to recognize, and I hope we're going to see this today, is that sport and the gospel have got a lot in common. And that's what

I want us to try and see today, and we're going to be looking a little bit at the passage that Anne-Marie read for us. And as we look at all this together on National Sports Sunday, we're going to be thinking about three things, unity, purpose, and satisfaction. Now, the first thing I want to say is that in sport, all three of these flourish. So unity, that's one of the wonderful things about sport. It brings people together and it makes you part of something that's very, very special. And that's especially true of a team sport like football. It brings you together and makes really strong connections. And I can say that that by a mile has been the best part of being chaplain for Carloway Football Club. It's just amazing to be part of that.

The team, the squad, it's an outstanding group of guys. And I've learned a lot from them. And there's just this wonderful sense of togetherness when you're part of a squad like that. And it means that every triumph is shared. Do you know that between us, me and Kenny Dokus, I've got 164 goals for Carloway?

What a team. What a partnership. I know the truth is, 163 of them are Kenny's. One of them is mine. It was not friendly, so it doesn't even count. But still, I'm holding on to it. It's a wonderful sense in which every triumph is shared. And it's even through an individual sports, because elite athletes always need a team around them. You see that in Formula One. Massive team around the drivers. You see it in something like tennis, something like golf. And my favorite example of that is actually cycling. I love watching the likes of the Tour de France, Vuelta Hispania, Giro d'Italia. And there's always an individual winner to these races. But if you watch cycling, it's incredible, because you've got a team of usually eight or nine riders, and you've got one leader, and all other riders, all they're trying to do is get their leader to win. And you'll see them when they're climbing up mountains. You'll maybe know that when you're cycling, it's actually a lot easier if you're cycling behind somebody else. And so they'll put the leader at the back, and one by one, the team will take turns to cycle at the front to try and get their leader at the top. And so eventually, when he does win, the person who crosses the line on his own, the only reason he's there is because his team has got them there. So amazing togetherness there. And that sense of unity is even shared by supporters. So six nations rugby, Scotland against England, our whole nation is united. United with one very clear goal, and one very clear enemy. And it very much brings people together. And you know, you see the beauty of that in our own community. And again, I've probably said this too many times already, but our football team has been amazing for bringing our community together. And we're so thankful for that.

[ 4 : 40 ] So there's unity. There's also purpose. Sports is just brilliant for fostering a sense of purpose. It's obvious in a team, everybody has a role to play. No one person can do it on their own. And even individually, participating in sport, it helps you with your own sense of purpose. You're striving to learn more, to improve, to get fitter, faster, and stronger. And it applies to supporters too. And here, you know, in our own community, there's so many people who are serving the community by their involvement in sport, even if they're not actually playing. And you'll see that with coaches, you'll see that with people who help out at matches, even the likes of cutting the grass, lining the pitch. Even cobbles is useful from time to time. So it's wonderful to have that sense of purpose together in sport. And then last of all is satisfaction. And this is one of the things that makes sports so captivating. There's such a deep sense of achievement when things go well. And at one level, that applies to participation. You know, there's a great sense of satisfaction about exercising, about working hard, about contributing to a team, about achieving a goal, whether it's like climbing a hill or running a marathon, or what it may be. There's a beautiful satisfaction that comes through participating in sport. At an even greater level, there is the satisfaction of winning. Tixie often reminds me that ministers aren't allowed to lie. And we will often say to kids, you know, it's not about winning, it's about taking part. And that's like a tiny bit true. Because the whole truth is that winning is awesome. Winning tastes so good. It's so satisfying. And whether that's Andy Murray winning Wimbledon all those years ago for the first time, Scotland qualifying for the World Cup a few months ago, Carloway winning the Jocksteen Cup a year ago, victory tastes so good. And so there's a deep satisfaction. And all of this is what makes sport so powerful. There's unity, purpose and satisfaction in sport. All of these flourish.

[ 7 : 04 ] But the second thing I want to say is that we also have to recognize that in sport, all of these fade. So they flourish, but they also fade. So in terms of unity, yes, you get that. But very often, the opposite is also true in sport. You get intense rivalry. And sometimes that hostility towards an opponent can be every bit as powerful as the sense of togetherness that you have in your own team. So ministers aren't allowed to lie. We're also not allowed to hate people. But west side make it really tempting. And, you know, looking at this whole sense of unity, you know, joking aside, like sports is where you see humanity at its best. But sometimes in the rivalries in sport, you actually can see humanity at its worst as well, can't you? And in that, the power of the crowd can be, you know, can really suck you down a dangerous path. First time I ever went to a football match, I would have been about 11 years old, 12 years old, and it was Coventry against Aston Villa. My uncle lived near to Coventry. We were staying with him. He got us tickets. We went to watch Coventry against Aston

Villa. This would have been about 1994 or something like that. And we went along to the game, and we were in the Coventry stand, and we were actually quite close to the Aston Villa fans. What I didn't know is that that's actually quite an intense rivalry. Coventry is quite close to Birmingham, Aston Villa in Birmingham, and so there was actually quite a rivalry. Now, I didn't care anything for Coventry or for Aston Villa before the game. I was just delighted to go and watch the game. Within the 90 minutes that I stood watching Coventry, by the end of that game, I loved Coventry, and I hated those Aston Villa fans over there. And it was so powerful, the way you got sucked into it.

Another way that the unity of sports fades is that as time goes on, people get forgotten. And that's definitely true of players. If the kids were still in here, I would ask them, do you know who Raymond Coppa is? And some of you may have heard of him. I had not heard of him until I checked this a couple of days ago. But every year for the first four years of the Ballon d'Or, Raymond Coppa was in the top three, and he won it in 1958. Now, I love football, and I would pride myself on having a good knowledge of football. I'm almost as good as Lewis, but I'd never heard of him. People get forgotten. And even more so, you know, there's always thousands of players who don't make it, who don't quite achieve their dreams, and they get quickly forgotten if they were even known at all. And even supporters,

I sometimes find this quite striking, you know, you can have somebody, you know, who maybe go to the same terrace every year for 60 years, and then they're gone, and they're quickly forgotten. In terms of purpose, that fades as well. In the chapter that we read, Paul speaks about the outward body fading. When you hit 40, you realize just how true that is. Now, it affects people at different rates. The outer body fades at different rates. So we had a Carlyway over 40s match last week, Carlyway against us. Archie McKeever was like Fabrizio Ravinelli up front, both in looks, movement, and skill. Superb. But an over 40s match, oh man, it really reminds you that your

outward body is fading. And, you know, we can't escape it. And you have this incredibly frustrating situation where in your head, you're still 17, and your body won't keep up with you. Now, when I was 17, I wasn't very good. So at 43, like even the 17-year-old head is not great. The body can't even keep up with that.

And, you know, you think of injury, ruining players' careers. I often think of Marco van Basten, one of the greatest footballers ever. He retired at 31, having been out injured for two years. So at 29, basically stopped playing, and an incredible career was cut short. And even without injuries, you know, as people age, as their sporting careers fade, that can come with, that can bring with it a kind of crushing loss of a sense of purpose. And, you know, one of the places where you often see that actually is in American football. We had CJ Stroud on the screen. And you may, those of you who kind of follow sports news will maybe often see that you actually often find American football players, late 30s, early 40s. And you kind of see tragic stories where you can see that they've just lost, lost a sense of purpose in their lives. And sometimes that can have really tragic consequences. And so there's the kind of fading in terms of unity, fading in terms of purpose. There's also a fading in terms of satisfaction. And this is where sport can actually be very, very deceptive. Because we think that victory will give us satisfaction. The truth is, it just leaves you longing for more. And that, of course, applies to more than just sport. It applies to money, to qualifications, to possessions. The more you have, the more you actually want more. And it's definitely true of sport. Lots of Rangers and Celtic fans in here, and they're playing later on today.

[12:33] Is 55 titles enough for you guys? Or are you just longing for one more? Just try being an Aberdeen fan, that's all I can say.

Often sport can leave us with a kind of what might have been feeling. My most vivid and clear memory of football when I was young is the final of the under-16s. I think it was called the SIS Cup then. I can't remember exactly what it was called. But it was the cup final, under-16. I was playing for United. We were playing against Lox. Lox was like the enemy team.

We didn't like them. Especially because in first year, they had nabbed our best player, Andy Murray. Sorry, Lox player. Lox was the enemy. More or less forgiven now. Westside's the enemy now.

I remember that final. Under-16. We were 1-0 up. And they were the better team. We were 1-0 up, though we were winning. It was a corner. I was a defender. The only thing I've got is height.

Corner. Corner came in. I managed to jump. I headed it. The ball went towards the goal. And it hit the joining of the post in the crossbar. And it bounced up. I have replayed that ball bouncing off that crossbar 10,000 times in my head in the 30 years since. It was so close, and it didn't go in. We lost 2-1. You're just left with that what might have been feeling.

[14:03] And you even see it. I don't know if any of you are watching the Winter Olympics. Lindsay Von, American skier, one of the greatest skiers that there has ever been. Incredible career. And so she made a comeback to get to the Olympics. A week before, she tore her ACL. She still thought, I'm just still going to do it. She did it. She crashed. She broke her leg. A devastating leg break, to be honest. And her career almost ends with a sense of disappointment, even though she's that she had a career beyond anybody's dreams. There's kind of this shadow of disappointment, despite all her success. And so in sport, unity, purpose, and satisfaction flourish, but they also fade. And that takes me to the last thing I want to say, and this is the most important thing I want to say. In the gospel, you get all three of these.

You get unity. And you get purpose. And you get satisfaction. The differences, they last forever. So unity, the gospel, makes us part of something amazing. You see this, Paul speaks about this. He's writing to a church in the Greek city called Corinth, and he's speaking about the shared faith that they have. That what they believe, you know, what he believes is what the Corinthians believe, that they share the same faith. They're trusting the same Savior, and they're longing for more people to participate in that. It's something that's shared. And this is where we've got to remember that from the Bible's point of view, the idea of different churches or different denominations is just crazy.

Like the Bible, Paul, if he was to come today to see Lewis or Scotland and all the different churches, he would say, what is wrong with you? Because from the Bible's point of view, there is only one church, and faith in Jesus brings us all into the same family. And that's the amazing thing, that if you are a Christian or if you become a Christian, then you're united to Jesus, and because of that, we are united to one another. Now, often the church has got this wrong, because often the church has made it look like it's kind of them against us. And sometimes that can be the kind of like, it's like the

church against the outsider, and you've got this sort of like hostility and barrier between the church and the community. Sometimes it's even churches against churches, where, you know, you've got like one group hostile towards one another. It should never be like that, because the gospel is not about them against us. The gospel is about life against death.

That's the enemy. And the whole of Christianity is grounded on what verse 14 says, that Jesus has been raised from the dead. Jesus has been raised from the dead. That's like the central cornerstone of Christianity. If Jesus didn't rise from the dead, we've got nothing. But we believe he did rise from the dead, because he did. And that's what our whole faith is grounded on. Death has been defeated, and everyone who trusts in him can have life. And that's an amazingly unifying message.

[17:30] It's a message that's inviting everyone. Now, often in sport, there isn't actually enough room for everybody. So in a team, there's not enough room for everybody. In a stadium, even, there's not enough room for everybody. You look at the World Cup tickets just now, not enough room for everyone who wants to go, or it's too expensive. And there's definitely not enough room for everyone on a podium.

And in sport, the ultimate prizes are incredibly exclusive. And in fact, very often, one can only win with another losing. I don't know if anyone's a boxing fan. There was a big boxing match last night, Wardley against Dubois. And you see, one gets a stunning victory, the other gets a crushing defeat. No choice. It's always exclusive, one or the other. None of that's through the gospel. Because in the gospel, there's room for everyone. There's an invitation to everybody. It absolutely does not matter your circumstances, your background, whatever you've believed or doubted or not been sure or done or not done or whatever. None of that matters. The gospel extends an invitation to all of us to trust in Jesus. And the amazing thing that for everyone who trusts in Jesus, all the riches, the honor, the joy of eternal life, it's shared with everyone. It is shared with everyone.

There's a beautiful unity in the gospel. It's also an amazing sense of purpose in the gospel. And so as we are united together as part of God's church family, we've all got a role to play. We've all got gifts that we can use. We've all got opportunities to serve. And that's not tied to skills or ability. And you can see this in terms of how Paul describes himself. He speaks about the treasure of the gospel, how that's in jars of clay. Now, that imagery of jars of clay, it's just basically to say it's in something incredibly ordinary. So you just imagine like an old chipped mug that you've got in your kitchen cupboard. That's how Paul's describing himself. And that the big point of this is that it's the totally ordinary that God uses. Because that's what all of us are.

None of us have anything special or better or anything about us. We're just dead ordinary. And it's with God's help that we're able to accomplish anything that we do.

[19:48] In sport, there's nothing more satisfying than an underdog story. So maybe you can remember the year Jenson Brutton and the Braun F1 team won the Formula One title of 2009. I think that was.

Incredible underdog story. Leicester winning the Premier League 10 years ago. Aberdeen winning any game is an underdog story. And we love an underdog story. It's so satisfying. The gospel is the greatest underdog story of all of history. Because when you look at Jesus, he was mocked, he was rejected, beaten, executed through the schemes of the religious elite and the all-powerful Roman Empire.

He was left dead. But he rose again. And from that point, the Christian church, which started off with 11 guys and a few women, has grown and grown and grown and grown. So there are now millions upon millions upon millions of believers in Jesus Christ. And as that church continues to grow, all of you, every single one of you, can have a beautiful sense of purpose as part of that. And, you know, often in sport, our sense of achievement is overshadowed by a sense of inadequacy. You know, for every amazing player, there's hundreds who weren't good enough. And even for amazing players, their amazingness is only temporary. The gospel is so magnificently different because in Jesus, we all have purpose. We all have a part to play. With Jesus, you're never forgotten.

With Jesus, you are never overlooked. With Jesus, you are never, ever past it. So in the gospel, there's unity. There's purpose. And the point I want to emphasize most of all is that in the gospel, you find amazing satisfaction. You find incomparable satisfaction. And that's because it's a satisfaction that never fades. It only grows. That's why Paul can speak in the way that he does at the end of the chapter. We do not lose heart, though our outward self is wasting away.

[ 21 : 54 ] Our inner self has been renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison. We look not to the things that are seen, but to the things that are unseen. The things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal. And here, Paul's speaking about the eternal life and security that Jesus offers to us all.

And this is where we see the biggest difference between sport and the gospel. There's loads that's similar. There's loads of ways in which they correspond, but there's one massive difference. What is the biggest difference between sport and the gospel? The biggest difference is the opponent. Because in sport, the opponent, the rival, the enemy is, it's Westside, it's England, it's Celtic or Rangers or both of them. It's the USA in the Ryder Cup. It's Novak Djokovic, if you're an Andy Murray fan, and beating them feels so good.

In the gospel, the opponent is death. And beating death is the best feeling of all.

And the key point is that on our own, we can't do that. We know that we can't do that. But the whole, whole point of the gospel is that Jesus has done that for us.

[ 23 : 22 ] That's what the resurrection is saying, that Jesus has done that for us. He has beaten death. You know, this is why we can say that actually, you know, in the gospel, you know, in sport, we say the taking part, it's the taking part that counts. It's not true. It's the winning that counts.

In the gospel, it's not the taking part that counts. It's the winning that counts. And the victory is a victory over death. And that's what Jesus has come to give us. He died and rose again, so that we can all have life. And all he asks of us, he doesn't ask us to be knowledgeable, to be experts, to be brilliant people, anything. He doesn't ask us for any of that.

He just asks us to trust him, to trust him and to follow him. It is the ultimate victory. It is the ultimate satisfaction.

And so, sports has got so much that's wonderful. It's got unity, purpose and satisfaction. All of that is actually a glimpse of what the gospel gives us. And I am so, so delighted to see you all here today. I'm so glad we've had this opportunity to celebrate the blessing that sport is to our community. And I'm so thankful that I have this opportunity to share with you all just how incredible the gospel is, how it gives us everything that we long for. And I hope that for all of you guys today that you can look to Jesus, rest in him, trust in him, and know the amazing joy that only he can give. Thank you.