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MORE THAN A GAME

*Stories, Prayers,
and Reflections for the
Student Athlete*

*Dr. Leonard DiPaul
Dr. Edward T. Hastings
Sharon Fuqua Retif*

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Dedication

We dedicate this book to coaches who have the opportunity to be the personification of gospel values in the lives of their athletes and to student athletes who strive to play with all their ability and live the life to which God is calling them.

Acknowledgments

We would like to acknowledge all those who have shared in our journey of sport and spirituality. For all those who have given us a great love of God, Church, and sport, thank you for the opportunity to share our passion. We would also like to acknowledge our families, without whom this book would not have been possible. Our parents, spouses, and children are a constant reminder of God's presence and have shown us the true meaning of finding God in the person and the experience.

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Introduction

God Is in the Game

More Than a Game is a book of stories about sports and much more. Sports provide an opening for more than just physical competition. Anyone who has played sports, or is a fan of sports, will be able to relate to the stories and experiences in this book. Through these stories we can celebrate the good and expose the cruel and painful that is present in sports. Sports, in so many ways, are a microcosm of the larger world around us. Like the everyday events and stories that fill the rest of our lives, we can experience God in the everyday events and stories of our athletic events.

Stories contain amazing power. Author John Shea writes: “No matter our mood, in reverie or expectation, panic or peace, we can be found stringing together incidents, and unfolding episodes. We turn our pain into narrative so we can bear it; we turn our ecstasy into narrative so we can prolong it. . . . We tell our stories to live” (*Stories of God*, pp. 7–8).

Shaya’s Story

In Brooklyn, New York, Chush is a school that caters to learning-disabled children. Some children remain in Chush for their entire school careers, while others can be

mainstreamed into conventional Jewish schools. There are a few children who attend Chush for most of the week and go to a regular school on Sundays.

At a Chush fund-raising dinner, the father of a Chush child delivered a speech that would never be forgotten by all who attended. After extolling the school and its dedicated staff, he cried out: “Where is the perfection in my son Shaya? Everything that God does is done with perfection. But my child cannot understand things as other children do. My child cannot remember facts and figures as other children do. Where is God’s perfection?”

The audience was shocked by the question, pained by the father’s anguish, and stilled by his piercing query.

“I believe,” the father answered, “that when God brings a child like this into the world, the perfection that he seeks is in the way people react to this child.”

He then told the following story about his son Shaya.

Shaya attends Chush throughout the week and a boy’s yeshiva (Torah institute) on Sundays. One Sunday afternoon, Shaya and his father came to the yeshiva as his classmates were playing baseball. The game was in progress, and as Shaya and his father made their way toward the ball field, Shaya said, “Do you think you could get me into the game?”

Shaya’s father knew his son was not at all athletic, and that most boys would not want him on their team. But Shaya’s father understood that if his son was asked to play, it would give him a comfortable sense of belonging.

Shaya's father approached one of Shaya's classmates on the field and asked, "Do you think my Shaya could get into the game?"

The boy looked around for guidance from his teammates. Getting none, he took matters into his own hands and said: "We are losing by six runs and the game is already in the eighth inning. I guess he can be on our team and we'll try to put him up to bat in the ninth inning."

Shaya's father was ecstatic as Shaya smiled broadly. Shaya was told to put on a glove and go out to play short center field.

In the bottom of the eighth inning, Shaya's team scored a few runs but was still behind by three. In the bottom of the ninth inning, Shaya's team scored again. Now with two outs and the bases loaded and the potential winning runs on base, Shaya was scheduled to be up. Would the team actually let Shaya bat at this juncture and give away their chance to win the game?

Surprisingly, Shaya was told to take a bat and try to get a hit. Everyone knew that it was all but impossible, for Shaya didn't even know how to hold the bat properly, let alone hit with it. However as Shaya stepped up to the plate, the pitcher moved in a few steps to lob the ball in softly so Shaya should at least be able to make contact.

The first pitch came in and Shaya swung clumsily and missed. One of Shaya's teammates came up to Shaya and together they held the bat and faced the pitcher

waiting for the next pitch. The pitcher again took a few steps forward to toss the ball softly toward Shaya.

As the next pitch came in, Shaya and his teammate swung the bat and together they hit a slow ground ball to the pitcher. The pitcher picked up the soft grounder and could easily have thrown the ball to the first baseman. Shaya would have been out and that would have ended the game.

Instead, the pitcher took the ball and threw it on a high arc to right field, far and wide beyond the first baseman's reach. Everyone started yelling, "Shaya, run to first! Shaya, run to first!" Never in his life had Shaya run to first.

He scampered down the baseline wide-eyed and startled. By the time he reached first base, the right fielder had the ball. He could have thrown the ball to the second baseman who would tag out Shaya who was still running. But the right fielder understood what the pitcher's intentions were, so he threw the ball high and far over the third baseman's head, as everyone yelled, "Shaya, run to second! Shaya, run to second!"

Shaya ran toward second base as the runners ahead of him deliriously circled the bases toward home. As Shaya reached second base, the opposing shortstop ran toward him, turned him toward the direction of third base, and shouted, "Shaya, run to third!"

As Shaya rounded third, the boys from both teams ran behind him screaming, "Shaya, run home! Shaya, run home!"

Shaya ran home, stepped on home plate, and all eighteen boys lifted him on their shoulders and made him the hero, as he had just hit a “grand slam” and won the game for his team.

“That day,” said the father who now had tears rolling down his face, “those eighteen boys reached their level of perfection. They showed that it is not only those who are talented that should be recognized, but also those who have less talent. They too are human beings, they too have feelings and emotions, they too are people, they too want to feel important (Krohn, *Echoes of the Maggid*).

The Power of Stories and Sports

This story captures beautifully what we intend for this collection. It is human, it is something we can all relate to, and it touches on “the more” that is possible in sports. We all know that there are a lot of problems in contemporary sports, but too frequently we do not stop to reflect on the inherent good that is there; we seldom tap into the good that can flow from the wellsprings of athletic competition. This story of sports shows us that dreams can come true, and that there is hope for all of us—even in sports.

Andrew Cooper in his book *Playing in the Zone: Exploring the Spiritual Dimensions of Sports* says that “the problem with sports today is not that we take them too seriously, but that we don’t take them seriously enough” (p. 18).

We don't appreciate them for the good that is possible in them. In the stories, prayers, and reflections within this book, you will find each aspect of sports taken seriously. From the athletic contests on the field to the challenges student athletes face in their family life and at school, each moment is a chance to meet God, for it is in our experiences that God is available to us.

How to Use This Book

What we intend to do in this book is to take common, ordinary, frequent athletic experiences and look more deeply into them. We have thirty different stories, and we hope you find God inside these good and bad experiences. Each of these stories is based on the real experiences of youth we have met or coached. These stories are offered as vehicles for you to take, ponder, and authenticate your own experiences, thus offering a glimpse into the deeper levels of meaning in sport.

More Than a Game is not a book meant to be read in one sitting. Instead, it is designed to be a book you pick up for fifteen to twenty minutes and then allow your heart, mind, and soul to interpret that which you have read. The hope is that you will begin to see your own story from the pages of *More Than a Game*. As you begin to see your experiences, feelings, and events in the pages of this book, it will become part of your daily athletic and spiritual practice.

This book has been written to provide the student athlete an opportunity to use her or his sport experiences as an opening to recognize the presence of God in and through the sport experience. God's presence is conveyed through story and reflection with the belief that we are of God and from God and that God is within each of us.

The Process for Reflection

There is a process present with each story that will help you make the connection to your own life and the larger faith connection. Each story is followed by a six-step process.

Step One: Breaking Open the Story

The initial step of the process is a brief exploration of the story that places religion and spirituality into the experience: What is the dilemma? What is the positive lesson present in the story? This section offers you a slight nudge toward seeing the experience through a filter of faith.

Step Two: Your Own Reflection on the Story

This section beckons you to get a little closer to the story. It calls for you to place yourself directly into the experience of the story or to reflect on a personal,

comparable experience. You can consider at this time how the experience in the story is similar to an experience you have had or witnessed.

Step Three: The Role of the Community in the Experience

Members of the school's athletic community play a unique yet supportive role in each story. Total communal participation calls to mind that the Church is a community of believers and that each member of this community plays a significant role in the building of self and one another in promoting the mission of the school and the kingdom. At this point you are invited to reflect on the possible responses from different members of the community to the situation in the story.

The question being posed is what the role of particular members of the community "should be" or what you would "like them to be": coach, family, team chaplain, school minister, and sport team. Each of these entities has a special role in promoting the mission of the school through the athletic program.

Step Four: Scriptural Reflection

Each story contains a theme that is reflected in a scriptural passage that brings the life of Christ or the followers of God into the experience. You are encouraged

to spend time with the scriptural passage—give it time to “sink in.” A reflection question follows each scriptural passage to help you explore the reading.

Step Five: Prayer

One of the connecting links between you and Jesus is prayer. Brief, reflective prayer in this step encourages granting and asking for forgiveness, giving thanks, or requesting a particular virtue or gift from God. You may choose to craft your own reflection or prayer that captures the awareness of your relationship with God in the experience.

Step Six: Going Forward—Action Step

The final step of the process asks the question, “Now that you know what you know . . . how will you live it?” This section provides a few suggestions for how you can demonstrate your new understanding of your covenant relationship with God. The methods provided for living out this transformation serve only as suggestions.

We encourage you to become comfortable with the six-step process and to use it as a guideline, not a restricted road map. Make the six-step process your own. Use it as an open map with open roads to your personal destination: your covenant relationship with God. If one

particular route seems jammed, consider going in another direction, your direction. We feel certain that God will be present on any road and on any journey. Drive freely. Continue moving forward, remembering the roads that you have traveled and remaining open to those about to be discovered.

In Closing

Each school and individual can use this book as would be most appropriate. By *appropriate* we mean that which brings you closer to an understanding of God and God's presence in your life. We offer *More Than a Game* as an animator and catalyst for discussion and as a vehicle of personal reflection and transformation. Primarily we hope that people who love God, love sports, and feel that sports can be used to help us in our understanding, appreciation, and love of God see this book as a testament of faith.

Reflection One



The Injured Athlete

Reflection

Jimmy worked hard for the past three years to have the opportunity to be the starting quarterback his senior year. He was well aware of the talented junior and even the sophomore who longed to be the starting quarterback at Saint Matthew's High School.

Jimmy's hard work and extra practices paid off. He was selected as the starting quarterback. He had earned his role, and demonstrated to all that he deserved to be at this position by leading his team to three victories in a row. Jimmy's popularity throughout the school was soaring, and he felt invincible. In the next game, however, one play was going to change everything.

In the third quarter of the fourth game, as he rolled out to pass, a linebacker from the opposing team leveled him with a bone-crunching, and perhaps season-ending, tackle. As Jimmy lay writhing in pain on the muddy field, the last things he was concerned about were the feelings that would soon play a critical role in his life, those being isolation and jealousy.

As an injured, nonplaying member of the team, Jimmy began to experience feelings of not being a “true” member of the team. He felt disconnected from his friends and teammates. He even felt awkward in the locker room and on the sidelines. An accompanying sentiment that gripped him even more than the isolation was a strong sense of jealousy. This jealousy led him to silently hope that his friend and replacement would not be a success and even that the team would lose during his absence . . . and worse, at times he wished that his replacements would also be injured. Along with his physical pain and injury, Jimmy suddenly found himself dealing with two painful emotions for which he was not prepared.

Reflecting on the Experience

Breaking Open the Story

Injuries are one element of sports that is impossible to prepare for. You can train to make your body less susceptible to injuries, but sooner or later injuries will occur. One of the hardest parts of being injured is watching your team or competitors continue with what you are unable to do. When injured we not only have to rehab our body, we also must rehab our spirit and emotions. One of the hardest parts of being a team member is supporting those who do what you only wish you could do. An injured teammate is just that, a teammate.

Your Own Reflection on the Story

- Why might an athlete experience the emotional injuries of jealousy, anger, and depression while recovering from an injury?
- When was the last time you suffered an injury that prevented you from performing to your fullest potential?
- How can an injured athlete continue to contribute to the team while undergoing rehab?

The Role of the Community in the Experience

What specific roles do the following members of the school and sport community play in this situation?

- the coach
- the family
- the team chaplain
- the school minister
- the sports team

Scriptural Reflection

For in everything, O Lord, you have exalted and glorified
your people,
and you have not neglected to help them at all times
and in all places.

(Wisdom 19:22)

- How does this reading speak to the struggles of the injured athlete?

Prayer

Lord,

In this time of confusion, I turn to you for guidance.

I find myself overwhelmed and uncertain and confused.

Provide me with the grace and wisdom to choose the best path.

At this time there seems to be no wrong or right way.

Help me to choose a way that is loving and good.

Amen.

Going Forward—Action Step

- Pray for your safety and the safety of your team and the competition at the start of each practice and game. Invite your teammates to join in your prayer. (You can use the prayer above or develop your own.)
- Take time to thank your trainers for their work in keeping you safe and in helping to rehabilitate injured athletes.
- If you are currently dealing with an injury, seek out ways in which you can contribute to your team. Possible options include helping younger players hone their skills and offering vocal encouragement during practices and games.

Reflection Two



Being in the Zone

Reflection

Colleen had a good feeling going into the semifinal game of the soccer league championship. She was confident in her own ability, and she was sure of her team's ability. The coaches prepared the team well, and they were ready to avenge one of their earlier losses by defeating Sacred Heart Academy.

The bus ride to the game was fun—everyone singing and charged up. The atmosphere was electric. The warm-ups went quickly and easily. Colleen could see her family in the stands. From time to time, they yelled her name and number: “Number 14, good luck!”

As the game started she recognized some of the opposing players. She knew she could hold her own against them; she could feel it in her bones. Colleen had speed on her side, and she felt relaxed in her game.

Early in the game, her teammate Sue broke loose from the pack. She and Colleen were on a two-on-one break going toward the goal. Colleen saw the goalie

cheating to her right side and easily lifted the ball over the goalie's left shoulder for the game's first goal. Colleen's teammates jumped all over her in celebration, and momentum was on their side.

Later in the game, on a corner kick, Colleen managed to head in a ball to put her team up 3–1. It was this goal that cemented their win and propelled the team to the championship game.

That night, as she was reflecting on the game, Colleen was amazed at the success of the day: the satisfaction of a game well played and won and the intensity of the competition. She pictured over and over again the goals she scored. She recalled the celebration the team shared at the end of the game and reveled in her teammates' congratulations on her fine performance. She also remembered the coaches' appreciation and support. Her family, too, was on her mind. She recalled the elation of the ride home and the prayers of thanksgiving during dinner that night. Things came together for Colleen that day, and she felt great. She thanked God that night for the blessings of the day.

Reflecting on the Experience

Breaking Open the Story

What a great experience it is to feel that everything is working out for you. It can be a magical experience filled

with awe and wonder. There are times in sports when everything lines up perfectly and, either individually or as a team, we experience brief moments of perfection. If we take the time, we can recognize God's presence in those moments. It's not that God has "chosen" us to win the game; rather these are moments to experience the perfection of God's creation and revel in the moment.

Your Own Reflection on the Story

- Have you ever felt like you were "in the zone" while playing a sport? Where did you see God's presence in that experience?
- How much practice time did you put in to prepare for that moment?
- Have you ever had the feeling that you just wanted to say "Thank you, God"? Describe the situation.
- What does it feel like to be aware that God truly wants the best for you?

The Role of the Community in the Experience

What specific roles do the following members of the school and sport community play in this situation?

- the coach
- the family
- the team chaplain
- the school minister
- the sports team

Scriptural Reflection

I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil. (Ecclesiastes 3:12–13)

- What does this verse say about God's desire for our lives?

Prayer

Dear Jesus,

I thank you for those special moments when I have felt close to you. You have blessed me not only with the ability to play sports but also with an awareness of the ways in which you work in my life. I appreciate the ability to reflect on the many ways you help me in my life, especially in those sports moments. Help me hold on to those moments as a reminder of your love in times of struggle and times of feeling distant from you. Amen.

Going Forward—Action Step

- Write a letter of gratitude to God for the ways God has graced your life.
- Write a description of the event or game in which you experienced being in the zone. Describe everything about it that you can remember. In particular describe the feelings you experienced. Refer to this the next time you are struggling with practice, as a reminder of the “good” that is waiting for you.

Reflection Three



Being a Team Player in Your Family

Reflection

The baseball season could not have been any more successful for Mike. His .388 batting average along with his 18 home runs and 80-plus runs batted in served to solidify his being selected as the team's and the league's MVP. Mike's solid season had vaulted his team into the Catholic league's three-game final series. Yet as Mike was receiving praises on the field, he would hardly have received votes from his family to be on the all-star team in his own home.

With the hectic schedule of practice and games, Mike was always "too busy" to accompany the family on their visits to Grandma's or to attend some family gatherings during the season. Mike's success and commitment to baseball also took precedence over helping around the house. Mike felt he had outgrown many of his chores around the house and that there were better ways for him to spend his time. Minor tasks such as clearing the table, keeping his room neat, and doing yard work were left for

his siblings who were not all-stars. Words from Mike's mom apparently were not effective. Outside the house Mike was seen as a hero; however, at home he had become more of a guest than an active family member. The movement away from family and family life escaped Mike until game three of the Catholic League final series. Each team had won a game, bringing them to the final game.

Game three would bring Mike to earth with a sudden thud. In the top of the inning, Mike's team was in the field holding on to a hard-earned two-run lead, though the underdog, Saint George, was clawing their way into the game. Mike's team was winning by one run. Saint George had runners on second and third, clearly in scoring position, with two outs. The Saint George batter chopped the ball toward Mike; fans were excited, as this routine play would surely end the game. Mike fielded the ball cleanly but then nonchalantly threw the ball three feet over the head of his first baseman. Two runs scored and Mike's deflated team went down in order. They lost. Mike even made the third out to end the game.

Arriving home, Mike discovered that a certain group of people did not judge him by his performance on the field. Congratulatory banners appeared throughout the house, welcoming home the son and the brother. The homecoming reminded Mike that trophies, accolades, and performance aren't what make him a member of this team, his family. After a few supporting comments and

attempts to put the game in perspective, Mike started his way upstairs accompanied by his sister's reminder, "Hey, Mr. Clean, clean your room."

Reflecting on the Experience

Breaking Open the Story

Life is more than the sports we play. It is more than winning the game, having a high batting average, setting a new track record, and all the other plateaus we strive for in sports. It is important to keep in perspective the role of sports in our lives. Sure, the game is important. Family life, school, and faith are also important. It is easy to fall into the trap of thinking that because of what we can do on the field, we deserve special treatment off the field and don't have to meet other responsibilities. Our family, our school, and our Church are other teams of which we are members. And, as with any team, we have to remember to act with humility and to recognize that each team member is equally important.

Your Own Reflection on the Story

- When have you encountered someone caught up in their own sense of self-importance? How did it make you feel?
- Have you ever been tempted to act like Mike? When?

- What challenges do you experience in trying to stay connected to your family?

The Role of the Community in the Experience

What specific roles do the following members of the school and sport community play in this situation?

- the coach
- the family
- the team chaplain
- the school minister
- the sports team

Scriptural Reflection

Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. . . . But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the

inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. (1 Corinthians 12:14–20,24–26)

- What does this reading tell us about humility?

Prayer

Dear Lord,

Thank you for the gift of family.

Give me the patience that will allow me to be thankful for the uniqueness of each member of my family and help me to appreciate the blessed environment that provides me support through growth and change.

Amen.

Going Forward—Action Step

- What efforts do you need to make to keep your family life in perspective during the season?
- What three things can you do to reconnect or strengthen your connection with your family? Plan on doing one of those things this week.

Reflection Four



Time Management and Priorities

Reflection

The game seemed to go on forever. Any time you and your team are getting beat by 32 points in the last quarter of a basketball game, the game seems endless. It reminded the players of a quote from a prominent coach, “Some nights a team loses and some nights a team gets beat.” Tonight Jason and his Archbishop Carroll team got beat.

The bus ride home following the game was as silent as the school library. The coach was so frustrated he didn’t even ride back with the team on the bus. He would meet the team in the locker room. The idea of a postgame practice was on the minds of most of the players. The practice would be grueling and there would be an assortment of comments from the coach, but at least it would eventually be over.

Arriving at the school, the team assembled quietly in the locker room. It was obvious the head coach was suppressing his anger and frustration. His face was stern, his body was tight, his eyes just glared as if he didn’t see anyone, though he was looking directly at them.

Finally he spoke—softly, methodically, and with firm intent. The coach said, “Anyone who is truly serious about being a member of this team will meet me for a practice tomorrow in this gymnasium at 7:00 in the morning, not 7:01 or 7:02—7:00 sharp.” Then with a quick turn to his right, the coach exited the locker room, leaving Jason with a dilemma.

Ever since Jason’s dad passed away two years ago, Jason had worked at a local bakery to earn extra money to help cover his tuition and make things a little easier for his mom. Every Saturday morning was busy at the bakery, but tomorrow was going to be one of the busiest of the year, with several catering jobs and special orders to take care of. Jason had already told his boss that he would come in and work the early shift from 4:00 in the morning until 12 noon. Jason looked at the clock in the locker room. It read 10:00, a late hour for such a dilemma. He certainly needed the money and the job, yet he wanted to complete his senior year as a member of the varsity basketball team.

Reflecting on the Experience

Breaking Open the Story

One of the wonderful lessons present in sports is the importance of fulfilling your commitment to yourself and your team. This is not always easy to do when you add in