

SoulSpace

SERIES: THE SPORTING CONNECTION

Season colour: **GREEN**In this series, **Fr Gerard Moloney CSSR** looks at what sport can teach us about celebrating our faith.

Few top sportspeople have the arrogance of Muhammad Ali, yet the aim of all top sports men and women is to reach the pinnacle of their sport, to be number one, to be regarded as the greatest.

Even unfit amateurs taking part in a casual kick around don't like to lose. There is an inbuilt competitive streak in most people. But some, like Ali, are born with an extra-strong competitive gene, a determination (and talent) to succeed that leads them to make the sacrifices necessary to win Olympic gold or an All-Ireland or Champions League winners' medal. When we think of sporting greatness, we think of people like Usain Bolt, Roger Federer, Pelé, Serena Williams, Tiger Woods, Christy Ring, LeBron James, Katie Taylor, Stephen Cluxton, Brian O'Driscoll, Lionel Messi, Cristiano Ronaldo. All are, or were, among the greatest in their chosen sport. They know what it is like to be number one.

LESSON IN HUMILITY

As Jesus points out in today's Gospel, the Christian has a different definition of being number one. His disciples had been arguing about which of them was the greatest, but Jesus tells them: "If anyone wants to be first, he must make himself last of all and servant of all." That kind of attitude won't get you far in a sporting environment. While you could remain modest off the field, modesty is no good on the field. When battle takes place, if you want to succeed, then you must beat your opponent. You have got to be selfish and ruthless if you want to be number one.

Success for the Christian is very different to success

for the sports person. It is about humility, service, putting others first. Pope Francis offers us a wonderful lesson on the meaning of humility.

As soon as he appeared on the balcony the night he was elected, it was obvious he was going to bring a different style and tone to the papacy. People could see it straight away – how he wore only a simple white cassock and black shoes, how he refused to live in the papal apartments, how he paid his own hotel bill, and dispensed with so many trappings of high office.

He has shown it in his concern for the poor, which is why he chose the name Francis in honour of Francis of Assisi – the great saint of the poor.

On Holy Thursday 2013, just a few days after his election, Pope Francis also did something new for a pope. He celebrated the Mass of the Lord's Supper not in St Peter's Basilica where it was originally scheduled but in a Rome juvenile detention facility. About 50 girls and boys attended. He washed the feet of 12 of them, including two girls and two Muslims.

The ceremony of washing another's feet is important, Francis said, because it shows that "the person who is most high among us must be at the service of the others".

What he did that night and ever since was to emphasise that the values of Jesus are the values that all Christians must live by – simplicity, humility, solidarity with the abandoned and the suffering, being least of all.

It's not the attitude we want Europe's Ryder Cup players to adopt this month as they face Team USA, but it is the attitude we must have each and every day as Christians. Unlike in the sporting context, for us success means being last. ■



Today's readings

GOD'S WORD TODAY

Wisdom 2:12.17-20

James 3:16-4:3

Mark 9:30-37

The cross is a paradox: it is here that the Gospel reveals who Jesus really is, and who God really is as well. We find the cross at the heart of Jesus' teaching about what it means to be his disciple. It is all about self-giving, self-sacrifice, and renouncing what people normally understand as power. Jesus may well be Lord and Master, but he does not 'lord it' over others. His embrace of the child is not simply affection, but a parable in action, to illustrate what should be the attitude of anyone who claims to be his disciple, to follow his teachings.

The noun 'authority' comes from the root 'to increase': authority should be seen within the Christian community as a service which enables people to grow as persons into the fullness of what it means to be a human being made in the image and likeness of God. Power is a different matter: it can be used for good or ill. The more authority or power a person holds, the more careful they must be to use it for the purpose for which it is intended. As Christians, we have the example of Jesus to guide our attitudes and actions.

Success for the Christian is very different to success for the sports person.

“It's hard to be humble when you're as great as I am.”

If asked to guess who made this statement, most of us would probably answer Muhammad Ali – and we'd be right. Throughout his career, Ali wasn't shy about claiming he was the greatest boxer of all time, and few could contradict him. He was a fantastic athlete and showman. His titanic fights against George Foreman and Joe Frazier captivated people worldwide. It was the golden era of professional boxing, when almost everyone could name the world's top heavyweight boxers, something most of us would not be able to do today.

AIMING TO BE LAST

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