

Read 1 Corinthians 9:19-27

One of the many, many areas of life that has been disrupted and put on hold during this coronavirus pandemic is sport. The Super Rugby competition was put on hold quite quickly, mostly because it involves teams travelling between Australia, NZ, South Africa, Argentina, and Japan – so that wasn't going to work! The NRL labored on a while longer, but has eventually succumbed. The Olympics in Japan scheduled for later this year have also, after holding out for a long time, eventually accepted the inevitable and postponed to next year.

Now I understand that there will be some who don't really care much whether there is sport on or not. And there will be some who will positively rejoice!

However, whether or not you're a sports fan, I invite you to pause for a minute to reflect on the plight of at least some of those who cannot play or compete now. Even I, as a sports fan, find it hard to feel sorry for some. There was a news story the other day in which former great Rugby League player and coach Graham Lowe says that the current crisis has unmasked a greed that has infected players, coaches, agents, and clubs in the game he loves. Just to illustrate his point, there was another story the same day reporting that an administrator at one club who resigned in order to save the club money is still reportedly walking away with \$320,000 as a payout – equivalent to 6 months of his salary. I can understand (a little) the star players getting the big money. After all, their careers are only short, and they are entitled to earn as much as they can while they can in return for the entertainment they provide for their fans. But this is an administrator of a sporting club, not a star athlete, getting paid \$640,000 a year! Pardon me if I don't have much sympathy for his plight!

But there are other sports people I do feel for. There are the tennis players who find themselves on the next rung down from the rich stars. Players like Georgian world number 371, who set up an online petition begging for help for these lower-ranked players who live hand-to-mouth, tournament to tournament – and with no tournaments, they are earning no money. Or the fans of the great sportsmen and women who are coming towards the end of their careers and who may now never see them play again, now that their careers have been put on hold. Or the athletes who have spent the last four years building up for this year's Olympics – training, dieting, sacrificing – all to have it put on hold.

My point is that sport is fickle. Whether it be this pandemic, or bad luck, or injury, or any number of other factors, there are athletes who give their all to a cause only to fail to reach their goal and win the prize they have worked so hard for.

In the New Testament, the Christian life is often likened to a race. In Hebrews 12:1-3, we are urged to run with perseverance the race marked out for us. In both Philippians 2:14-18 and Galatians 2:2, Paul speaks of his concern that he has not run his race in vain. In Philippians 3:12-14, he talks about pressing on toward the goal, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

And here in 1 Corinthians 9:24-27, he says:

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.

If athletes in physical sports give so much and work so hard, all for a perishable and often unattainable goal, how much should we be committed to the spiritual race we are in, knowing that the prize is attainable (because Christ has already won it for us), and is eternal and indestructible!