

Connecting faith, sports can be challenging, Truett professor says

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WACO (BNG)—John White has competed against some of the world’s top athletes—and ministered to still more of them.

“I raced against (future three-time Tour de France winner) Greg LeMond once, and he would never know this, but I beat him in a small race in Ohio,” said White, assistant professor of practical theology and director of the sports chaplaincy/ministry program at Baylor University’s [Truett Theological Seminary](#).



John White That was back in his college days at Indiana University, when White was a high-ranking amateur cyclist. His work as a chaplain since then has reached similar levels, including stints with NCAA Division 1, 2 and 3 teams and with the Olympic Training Center.

Chaplaincy has provided the most sustained challenge for White. Nearly two decades as a sports chaplain did not enable him to achieve what he wanted for himself and his athletes and coaches—a bridge between the worlds of Christian faith and high-end athletic competition.

White's 17 years spent in NCAA schools with Athletes in Action, while often rewarding, left him longing for more authenticity and depth in a profession he saw as often too heavy on evangelism and too light on theology.

So, he entered the academic world.

Weaving together Christian belief and sports

"What really got me into this is that I felt, as a former athlete, I didn't know how to weave together Christian belief and sports," White said.

That was then. Now, White has not only connected those dots himself, but also specializes in helping others—athletes, coaches and chaplains—make the connection.

He earned a doctorate in moral theology at the University of Edinburgh and has written articles for journals ranging from *Sport, Ethics and Philosophy* to *Studies in Christian Ethics*.

He was one of a handful of Protestants invited to the Vatican last month for the Pontifical Council for the Laity's "Church and Sport" seminar. From it, White said, is likely to spring Vatican doctrine on sport, the body and ministry.

It may seem odd to some to intertwine sports ministry with moral theology, but White finds precedent for it in Christian history.

"In moral theology, the understanding is we are moral creatures" who must seek to connect "any sphere of activity toward God," he said.

Over-valuing and de-valuing the body

Tendencies to over-value or devalue the body are equally wrong, he insists. In modern American sports—where athletes sacrifice their bodies to injury or injure others and where they are pumped full of performance-enhancing

drugs—both tendencies can be seen.

Where all this fits into sports chaplaincy, White said, is in how a minister can help athletes and coaches see the larger moral issues at play amid the all-consuming desire to win.

“As a Christian, this is not my body. It’s the Lord’s body. The body is good and needs to be properly related” to Christ, White said.

But many sports chaplains, especially those who are volunteers, usually are not equipped to help athletes and coaches see these issues. Sometimes it’s because the chaplains have their own goals.

“Some sports ministries tilt toward seeing the evangelistic value and don’t see what is good or evil or wrong about sports,” White said.

Evangelism has its place, he added, but it should not come at the expense of other sports chaplaincy duties, such as pastoral care and the “prophetic side” charged with calling out the systemic challenges to spiritually healthy sports.

Certification is gaining ground

A lot of progress could be made toward this model of sports chaplaincy if a system of certification were adopted for sports chaplains, White said.

Unlike chaplains who work in hospitals, law enforcement, corrections and the military, those who minister to sports teams are not required to be endorsed by religious institutions, he said.

While endorsement is gaining ground in Europe, it has yet to catch on in the United States, partly because there are so many forms of professional sports here, White said.

The chaplains of many professional teams, including the NFL and NBA, are

volunteers. If some are paid, it is more often by local churches or parachurch groups.

That arrangement often fosters loyalty to a team that could make it challenging for a chaplain to see the need for systemic changes in an organization, he said.

White and Truett work to train future athletic chaplains to meet these demands through a faith-and-sports lab. It's an annual three-day intensive course that simulates the challenges chaplains will face in university and professional sports. Athletes from Baylor, SMU and other universities are used as subjects.