
Watching the Bouncing Ball: Interscholastic Sports on Adventist Campuses

1. Play Has Already Begun

by Bonnie Dwyer

While General Conference brethren debate the pros and cons of interscholastic sports during the 1988 annual council in Nairobi, Kenya, men's and women's basketball, football, soccer, volleyball, softball, and track teams on Adventist college campuses will have already started another season of intercollegiate sports. A recent survey conducted by the SDA Health, Physical Education, and Recreation Association (SDA-HPERA) found that in North America 80 percent of the Adventist colleges and more than 50 percent of the academies (who responded to the survey) compete with other schools in at least one sport. Some colleges have had intercollegiate sports programs for several seasons and are joining the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA).

The NAIA is a league made up of schools that have less than 4,000 students. The oldest such association—having existed for a half century—its purpose is to give smaller colleges the opportunity to compete with schools of equal means. The NCAA is the larger colleges' (4,000 or more students) league. Like the NCAA, the NAIA holds an annual national tournament.

A look at five colleges in different parts of the

country provides an insight into a major new development in Adventist campus life.

Columbia Union College

Since the 1984-1985 season, Columbia Union College has awarded \$72,000 in scholarships each year to academy students entering the college's sports program. The college has given out \$1,500 scholarships to 18 soccer team members and 30 men's and women's basketball team members per year.

Four years after the program started, CUC's varsity men's basketball team has been picked to win its district this year in the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (Division III). Last year the president, William Loveless, created an athletic council to advise on the budget, coach selection, philosophy, and league policies. On the council are Wendy Pega, a member of the physical education department; Rick Murray, the basketball coach and men's dean; a financial administrator; a public-relations representative; another faculty member; and an administrator.

Pega calls the varsity teams successful for the school just in terms of what they have done for the intramural program, which she directs. Good players now have a place to go, she says, and it has taken the competitive pressure off the intramural games, which are now more like what they were

Bonnie Dwyer, before assuming her present responsibility of raising an infant son, was the public information officer of the city of Brea, California. As its news editor, she has frequently appeared in *Spectrum*.

originally designed to be, a place where all students can take part in sports activities.

Coach Rick Murray says CUC's teams stress life-style and attitude more than overt witnessing. He tells the players that it is important not to give sermons but to be a "sermon in shoes." Neverthe-

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less, team members are often asked, spontaneously, by referees, coaches, and members from the opposing team to give postgame Bible studies. Murray recalls when the team waited an hour and fifteen minutes after the game while a member gave a Bible study to three members from the opposing team. In addition, teams hold clinics, vespers, and worships at local academies.

Roland Wilkinson, a business major and a guard on the basketball team, says he did not choose CUC just because of the basketball team; he wanted to attend a Christian school. But he is enthusiastic about how good this year's basketball team is. "Only one player graduated and there are five or six good new players. We've been picked to win our district," he says. Although CUC does not play other Adventist schools during its regular season play, Wilkinson feels CUC has the best, most competitive team for an Adventist college.

Atlantic Union College

Atlantic Union College also provides basketball and soccer scholarships and has decided to join the NAIA. AUC's program began 1986-1987 with exhibition games (considered a trial season), which prompted the college board to approve AUC also joining the NAIA this year. Coaching the team is Stacy Nelson, the chairman of the physical education department, whose doctoral dissertation, "A Ra-

tionale for a Program of Interscholastic Athletics," helped to set up the AUC plan.

Atlantic Union College student Ivan Davis chose to leave Berrien Springs, where his father teaches English at Andrews University, and study at AUC because of the basketball team. When he heard about the AUC program, he says he was eager to be a part of it. "I had always believed that interscholastic sports and Christian behavior could be combined on an Adventist campus as they have been at other small and large Christian college campuses. I also believed that interschool sports could provide for participants what the intramural programs seemed unable to—a learned self-discipline. I think an interscholastic program presents possible opportunities for individual gains as well as school-wide gains."

Walla Walla College

Walla Walla College, which has the oldest, largest Adventist sports program, fields the most teams for intercollegiate competition: men's football, men's and women's basketball, men's and women's volleyball, coed soccer, men's and women's softball, and men's and women's track. Walla Walla is also the most overtly evangelistic of all the college sports programs. Almost 10 percent of the student body takes part in the program which is affiliated with the Fellowship of Christian Athletes. (This national organization sponsors Bible-study groups in professional and collegiate varsity teams. It is promoted by luminaries such as Dallas Cowboys coach Tom Landry, and former Philadelphia 76er Julius Irving. Walla Walla has organized the only Adventist chapter.)

Walla Walla College started intercollegiate competition five years ago when Tim Windemuth, who had previously operated similar programs at Orangewood Academy in Southern California and Campion Academy in Colorado, joined the faculty

Athletics is a very effective medium by which to share Christ, says Windemuth, director of the Walla Walla program where witnessing is a ma-

major part of the sports activities. In addition to playing other colleges, Walla Walla plays teams from the state prison and the local police department. Team practice includes a Bible study session. After a home game opposing teams are always invited to share food and fellowship. When the team travels to an academy, players are prepared to help with programs the entire weekend: Friday-night vespers, Sabbath school, church, afternoon meetings, the ball game, postgame recreation and activities for all students, followed by a singing, sharing session. Windemuth says he likes to sponsor tournaments with other schools at Walla Walla, because he can then structure activities to encourage good play rather than bitter competition. For instance, instead of an elimination tournament Walla Walla often structures a tournament so that each team gets a chance to play every other team at the meet. At the end, there is a winner by virtue of who has the best record, but the spirit of fair play has been fostered.

Given that his teams take part in some 200 programs a year, it would seem that the outreach potential of sports would be its biggest selling point. But to Windemuth, the outreach activities are third on his list of foci for the program. First, are the students in the program. Sports provides a common ground for peers to talk about what is important in their lives. He wants them to be comfortable about sharing their Christian experience with one another. Secondly, he says the sports program promotes a positive image on campus, a rallying point for Christian fellowship. The outreach is third.

Asked to tell his best story from the past year's experience, he thinks of an incident at an Adventist academy. A player stopped to talk with a girl who was crying in the hallway. Three days later the girl told the player how important his kind words and listening ear were in helping her to decide to attend a Christian college. "He recruited a kid for Christ. As long as we keep Christ at the center of our program, it doesn't matter what our win/loss record is."

But Windemuth also admits that a strong team helps to keep those witnessing opportunities coming. Last year, Walla Walla lost only one football game. This year he says, they will be

playing more teams of a junior varsity caliber.

One alumnus was won over for sports after spending several days with the team at practice and then on the road. "Your young men have changed my opinion of athletes," he told Windemuth. The man was so impressed he wrote an article about the team for the *North Pacific Gleaner*.

"Hey, we're Christians, too," Windemuth says. "We just want the kids to learn a way of life that includes sharing Christ. When kids come back after graduation and tell stories about being involved with sports teams and sharing Christ just like they did at Walla Walla, that's the trophy."

Walla Walla even puts the sports teams, administratively, under campus ministries, although Windemuth is himself a member of Walla Walla's department of health, physical education, and recreation faculty.

Loma Linda University

Each Adventist school seems to develop its own system for operating teams. For instance, at Loma Linda University, a General Conference institution that officially cannot field teams for play with other schools, a way was devised through the student-affairs office to participate in intercollegiate sports: instead of administrative departments, teams are organized by campus clubs. A Health Education Recreation Club has several teams, including basketball, soccer, and a girls' volleyball team. Two years ago Loma Linda played six games against non-Adventist colleges. That number doubled to 12 during the 1987-1988 season. Included in each year's schedule of games for LLU is a game against Pacific Union College, which also does not officially recognize its team. (An alumnus from Modesto comes in to coach the team.) Last year, the LLU team also played Walla Walla.

Walt Hamerslough, chairman of Loma Linda's physical education department, says the school would like to expand its program. It has received positive remarks from non-Adventist schools. People have heard about the Loma Linda Medical

Center, but don't know much else about the organization. "It gives us a chance to share [Christ] in a fellowship way," he says.

Union College

Two years ago, Union College started its men's basketball team to fellowship with athletes from other Christian colleges. The team plays 16-18 games a season and at each game the team has a pregame worship and a postgame social with opposing teams.

The team isn't a member of a league and isn't affiliated with any of the college's departments. Its coaches are volunteers and it raises its own budget. One of the volunteers, Donald Pursley, Union College's vice-president of finance, says they emphasize self-discipline, cooperative attitudes, and teamwork.

Academies

Many Adventist academies also have active teams that compete in community leagues and offer scholarships to students on the team. One academy with an active program for many years, and one of the largest Adventist academies in North America, is Takoma Academy in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area. When John Graham joined the academy faculty as a physical-education teacher in the mid-1960s, he started the school's interscholastic basketball teams. Every year the men's varsity team plays 21-22 games, the men's junior varsity 15 games, and the women's varsity 10-12 games. In 1986 Takoma Academy added a track team to its interscholastic program. According to Frank Jones, the academy's vice-principal and one of the former basketball coaches, both the track and basketball programs have enjoyed great success.

It was the success of the program at La Sierra Academy that turned Walt Hamerslough at Loma Linda University into a leading advocate of inter-

school sports programs. He had been opposed to the academy program at La Sierra when it was first proposed, and he fought it all the way to the union committee. Despite his protests, it was approved. As the program grew and became successful, Hamerslough changed his mind about the advisability of such a program for Adventist schools. Now, as the executive director of SDA-HPERA he has become the spokesman for the organization in its attempt to convince the General Conference to change its official position banning interscholastic sports.

Unfortunately, he says, there does not seem to be anyone at the General Conference willing to take a stand supporting sports against those who would ban them. He feels that those who oppose sports base their judgments on what they see on television and read in the newspapers—something very different from what he advocates.

Hamerslough says he has asked the General Conference to allow a representative of SDA-HPERA to be present at the 1988 Annual Council in Nairobi, Kenya, but he assumes the General Conference will not fund the person's trip, and he does not know who will. He does know that George Akers, director of the General Conference Department of Education, will present a strong case in Kenya against interscholastic sports. Akers sent a very strident message to the national meeting of the SDA-HPERA this year making very clear his displeasure with intercollegiate games.

However, with college boards approving the sports programs in North America, perhaps the vote in Kenya will be a moot point. Hamerslough says he hopes the General Conference will recognize that whatever they do, the young people will probably continue to play games, whether or not they have school or church approval. What he suggests is that the General Conference take positive action to help set the proper spirit for sports. He envisions a commissioner or council on sports at the North American Division level that could assist institutions in setting up and maintaining proper programs. He says there need to be workshops for coaches to help train them in setting up programs with proper Christian standards.