

## 2. Debate on the Sidelines

Written by Ted Robertson, Todd Coupland  
Reported by Dawna Ringering and Sean Wilson

Since 1893 when Battle Creek College attempted interschool sports, the Adventist church has considered inter-organizational sports unnecessary and unwanted in Adventist education. Until recently, this stand has not been challenged. A year and a half ago the General Conference appointed a committee to investigate the situation of interorganizational sports in the Adventist church. This includes interschool and interchurch sports. The committee made a study of the situation and produced a report. That report says each division will be permitted a protocol that has to be petitioned to the union committee (of the division), which will decide whether the petitioning organization will be able to participate in certain sports, with several guidelines.

Dr. George Akers, world director of education for the General Conference and former dean of the School of Education at Andrews University, served on the study committee. He has made a statement of intent: the Department of Education will draw up another report that will call for elimination of interorganizational competitive sports in the Adventist church. This is a reaffirmation of the current church stand, and this report will not advocate the exception protocol.

There is speculation that both the reports will

be presented to the General Conference annual council this fall in Nairobi, Kenya. General Conference President Neal Wilson declined an interview with the *Student Movement*.

A university administrator said "It would be a disaster to go to Nairobi to discuss this North American problem. The General Conference does not fully understand the problem. They should let the unions and schools take care of this problem."

Dr. David Faehner, Andrews University vice-president for academic advancement, said that taking the issue to Nairobi "may be sidestepping the issue. It may make it like the women's issue" so that the problem is not quickly solved.

In clarification of the Education Department's position, Akers said, "We have no objection to intramural sports. Everything that we want to accomplish in Christian education is right on campus." Akers also said that he is not opposed to "friendship matches" in which two schools have a sporting event on the agenda during a spiritual and social gathering.

"All along, Dr. Akers has been articulating a position that is different from the vote the committee has taken. He is not being secretive on how he or his staff stands," said Dr. Calvin Rock, chairman of the coordinating committee that studied this issue.

Rock continued, "I think the committee did a good job. I think they discussed it fairly." Akers added, "Health and physical education teachers had input through the whole [study]."

The March Adventist Intercollegiate Association meetings at Atlantic Union College sent a letter to Rock calling for student input into the decision-making process.

This situation began when the physical education teachers of Adventist schools asked the North American Division K-12 [Kindergarten through

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This article is reprinted from the April 20, 1988, *Student Movement*, the Andrews University campus newspaper. Ted Robertson is a senior zoology major at Andrews University and will be the editor of the *Student Movement*, 1988-1989. Todd Coupland graduated from Andrews University in 1988 and is now working for Bear, Sterns & Co., Inc. Sean Wilson is a senior public relations major at Andrews University and last year was layout assistant and sports editor of the *Student Movement*. Dawna Ringering graduated in 1988 from Andrews University where she was a writer and researcher for the *Student Movement*. She has been accepted into a masters program at Howard University's school of journalism.

high school] and the Board of Higher Education to consider the interschool sports activities situation. "When it was seen by these two organizations that this was a worldwide church problem, it was referred to the General Conference in Rio at the annual council two years ago," said Akers. "It was here that a study committee was [appointed to study into this concern]."

The group to study this was composed of two committees. One was the coordinating committee that received reports from the divisions worldwide, and the other studied interorganizational sports in North America. Dr. Rock chaired both committees. The coordinating committee compiled the findings and produced the report that reinforced the church's stance on this issue but allows for exceptions.

Opinions of Adventist leaders concerning interorganizational sports are mixed. "When you [obtain opinions from] board chairmen, the academy principals, and the board of trustees members, there is severe division," said Akers.

"Sports are an extremely important part of our society today," says Walter Hamerslaugh, executive director of SDA Health Physical Education Recreation Association. "Our [SDA-HPERA] philosophy is that you're not going to get people to stay away from sports, and so we feel that we

need to teach people how to relate to sports in the proper way. One way is through interorganizational sports programs. This will teach people how to be good spectators, winners, and losers." He continued, "I am a promoter of organized sports if properly conducted."

On the other side of the issue, Dr. Donald Sahly, president of Southern College, said, "Southern College would not support an intercollegiate program at all. . . . I have problems with this issue. Philosophically, this does not support the goals of Christian education. . . . I totally agree with George Akers on most issues."

Faehner said, "In the ideal sense one could argue that we need to be spending all our time working for the Lord. You wouldn't have time for fun and laughter, you are strictly needing to serve society. I respect this philosophy."

He continued, "However, in the world we live in, sports are a part of our being and they can be a very healthy part of our lives. Sports develop camaraderie, exercise, cheering for one friend over another. . . . An Andrews team playing basketball, tennis, hockey, or softball [in an intercollegiate fashion] would boost the morale of the campus. In a practical way it causes people to rally around something."

"Loma Linda would be in favor of establish-

## Early Adventist Competition

The Student Movement *printed an article on the first Adventist venture into interschool sports* (Ami Long, "Edging Out the Competition," 72:12, January 22, 1987). The following is an excerpt from it.

The final seconds of the fourth quarter steadily ticked away. The college team executed its play, scored, then watched in disbelief as flags flew and referees nullified the gain. Unwilling to end the game with the local high school in a tie, the college supporters proceeded to engage in a violent verbal assault on the competency of the officials in a desperate (albeit unsuccessful) attempt to make them reconsider. Those in charge remained firm in their decision, a rematch was planned, and the students returned to their dormitories to discuss the gross injustice with their peers

who were unfortunate enough to miss the game.

Though this ill-fated team was short-lived (it lasted less than six months), it was important in the respect that it set a precedent for all organized competitive sports in Adventist colleges. The game cited took place on the Battle Creek College campus in the fall of 1893. Local newspapers reported the match and gave specific attention to the violent disagreement at the end of it. They then directed the public's eye to a special football competition between the American and British students of the college. When the game took place, the British won. The event was touted as "The Great International Football Game," was heavily attended, and was the primary reason for the downfall of competitive Adventist athletics.

One British student sent a copy of the newspaper's game

ing a limited intercollegiate sports program," said an administrator at that university. Concerning competition, President Richard Leshar of Andrews University said, "You are into an area of rivalry which does not allow you to center on Christian principles. This rivalry builds into a situation leading to ill-will and antipathy." He feels it is unrealistic for each union or school to decide this issue on its own. "It just leads to confusion." He said the issue should be decided at the annual council.

President John Wagner of Union College said he would like the decision to be made at a committee where the North American college presidents can be in attendance. He strongly supported having this issue decided on a local and union level.

Leshar continued, "The system is not a problem, sports is a problem in the church. In some instances the rivalries build up a spirit that is keen as those in war."

Changing his opinion on the issue, Paul Chapman, principal of San Fernando Valley Academy, related, "I've been against it [inter-school sports] for years. I just came to Southern California. We've always been against playing other schools up there. But down here, it seems that everything is so congested, and the kids are

out running the streets. A little ball may keep them out of trouble."

Another supporter of the current church stand, Dr. Richard Orrison, principal of Andrews Academy, said: "Interscholastic and intercollegiate competition has a potential to hurt the schools involved. With all the things that are needed in Adventist schools, to carve out a position that is largely or primarily to be that of a coach for a small program for a mere 20 students is something that I doubt can really be afforded."

Doug Newberry, professor of physical education at Andrews University, told that Akers made a comment on a tape sent to a convention for Adventist PE teachers on April 5, 1988, to the effect that if some of these "jocks" don't like what our schools provide, then maybe they should go somewhere else.

Dr. John Pangman, chairman of Andrews PE department, said, "The question must be asked that even if the team were exemplary, could we really witness for our Lord and for our church? And if that were [not] to happen, . . . it would be counterproductive."

Ted Wick of Church Ministries for the North American Division, outlined part of the current church position on interorganizational sports in a prepared statement:

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coverage home to his parents in Australia, who lent it to Ellen White who was shocked that such "frothy language" would be employed in reference to her model school and lost no time in writing an incensed letter to W. W. Prescott, president of the college. Prescott read the letter to the faculty and student body. They called off a football game scheduled for that day, and, in his words, "decided to have no more match games of any kind on the grounds."

Hammerslough commented on the stand of Mrs. White against interorganizational sports competition:

My reaction to that counsel is the same as my reaction to the counsel about riding bicycles. And her counsel about work in the South where she said there should be separate churches for the blacks and the whites. [These counsels] were important and needed to

be given for that time. Some sports in the late 1800s and early 1900s were very brutal. Boxing used to go until someone fell down, and in fact Teddy Roosevelt, who was a strong supporter of football, said it needed to be cleaned up. In addition, there was a heavy amount of gambling. Ellen White was not the only one writing against sports; many other Christian writers were also.

Then, many people were rural. Now, there are many who are urban and I think recreational pursuits are different nowadays than then.

President Richard Leshar of Andrews University spoke concerning this issue. "Ellen G. White never condemned the playing of games. She even voiced support of an innocent game of ball. The problem is defining what is innocent and what is not."

Those who utilize physical fitness and sporting activities as a means of Christian witness are encouraged to do so with these guidelines:

(1) Teaching, training, skill improvement in a Christian atmosphere is the purpose of the activity.

(2) A college team of Christian athletes going to an academy and holding a basketball clinic, in which good sportsmanship is a central part of what is taught. Going to a prison facility where the play is an outreach ministry is encouraged.

(3) It is not to be used as an avenue to open the

way for interschool or interchurch events that pit institution against institution in regularly scheduled elimination play.

(4) That inner-city athletic activities be recognized as desirable for the benefit of our own youth who may not be in an SDA school intramural situation.

As the comments suggest, interscholastic sports is a divisive issue among educators and other church leaders. At this juncture, we cannot foresee the outcome, but we can surely predict that the issue will not just go away.