

6

RACING TO WIN

When we lived in Louisiana, we had good family friends who moved from their home near Baton Rouge to Jackson, Mississippi, a good two hours away. Not long after, we were traveling back to visit our family in the Carolinas and made the slight detour to see them again. We pulled up in their driveway; the door of our station wagon opened and our oldest son, about five years old at the time, jumped out. His friend emerged from the house about the same time. They met in the front yard and the conversation went something like this:

“Hi, John!”

“Hi, Peter!”

“Aarrgh!”

“Rrrrr!”

And they locked arms and rolled in the grass, trying to pin one another to the ground. Both mothers, stunned, circled around them saying, “Boys! Boys!” The fathers, on the other hand, ignored this behavior as perfectly normal.

Mothers are made to nurture. They want everyone to be happy. They want everyone to win. They try to rewrite the rules of our board games so no one loses, and delight to find toys that feature “cooperative play”. It extends into the schoolroom, too; the idea of cooperative learning where students work together in groups

and everyone shares the same work and same grade was definitely invented by women.

Boys just don't think that way. They love to try their strength, whether physical, intellectual, or emotional, against others. They want to see where they stack up. They love to compete, they love to win, and sometimes they would rather lose than not try. Maybe some boys seem to avoid competitions, but they probably just haven't had a chance to compete on their strengths. It's deep seated in the male psyche. It is normal male behavior to say "Hello" and proceed to test your mettle against the other guy. Nothing to see here, folks, just move along.

Future leaders

Our Father made our boys to grow up to be leaders. They will lead in the world and lead in the church. Even those who aren't called to lead the church and never have the opportunity to lead the community, those who seem destined to be subordinates, will still lead their families. The quietest, shyest boy will one day be the head of his household. This may be why boys love competition so – it gives them a chance to see if they are worthy to be the leader in that area.

Melanie majored in biology in college. She remembers studying about the pecking order – the idea that in groups of some kinds of animals, a hierarchy will develop: the toughest chicken rules the roost and pecks on anyone he pleases, the next toughest chicken can peck anyone but the top chicken, and on down to the scrawny little bird that everyone else pecks on. Picking on anyone who isn't tougher than you is hardly a righteous act, but Melanie often thinks about this when she watches groups of boys. The nicest, kindest boy, who would never think of being ugly to those weaker than he is, still wants to know where he is

in the “pecking order.” He wants to know who is strongest, who is smartest, who can bend his thumb backwards the farthest, who can burp the loudest ... you get the picture. He may never want to use that information to “peck on” anyone, but he wants to test his strengths against others.

Like anything, this desire can take a righteous direction or turn into sin. We’ve seen the unrighteous kind in our home all too often. Some days there seems to be a pestering competition going on. One boy tries to get the goat of another, the goat-ee tries to get back at the goat-er, or is that goad-er? The older bullies the younger, the younger provokes the older, the one in the middle goads them both on for sheer entertainment. It’s a race to the bottom, a competition to see who can be the biggest pest.

Proverbs 6:16-19 says that

*There are six things the Lord hates, Yes, seven are an abomination to Him:
A proud look, A lying tongue, Hands that shed innocent blood
A heart that devises wicked plans, Feet that are swift in running to evil,
A false witness who speaks lies, **And one who sows discord among brethren.***

It was a shock to our whole family to realize that the Lord rates “sowing discord among brethren” with lying and shedding innocent blood. It’s an important concept to teach your sons.

Another unrighteous result of this desire is bragging – using our strengths to glorify ourselves rather than the Creator who gave them to us. Paul says in Galatians 6:14, “*But God forbid that I should boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ,*” and the cross is certainly not what our boys are bragging about. The Lord Himself told Jeremiah, “*Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, and*

let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me ...”¹

Again, boasting is behavior that needs to be corrected and taught against, especially when the bragging becomes physically or emotionally abusive, when it turns into bullying. As believers we should be showing meekness and mercy, not taking advantage of the weaknesses of others.

The biblical view of competition

Is competition all wrong? We picked up a tract at a book fair once that argued that it was. What does the Word say? It appears to give the opposite teaching; God uses the image of competition repeatedly as an example for us to follow or an illustration of spiritual truth. In the Christian life, we are encouraged to “*run with endurance the race that is set before us.*”² In the life of the church, we are told to “*outdo one another in showing honor.*”³ The fact that some win and some don’t should not put us off; God says to use that knowledge as a spur to try harder. “*Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it.*”⁴

This is balanced by God’s reminder of two factors – the need for discipline and obedience, and our dependence on Him in all things. “*If anyone competes in athletics, he is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules,*”⁵ Paul wrote to Timothy. To the Romans he said to keep in mind that “*it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy.*”⁶

What to make of this? Simply that competition, properly framed and understood, is a healthy and even biblical part of life. The Lord would not encourage us to use an ungodly pursuit as an

example and role model, and He points to the challenge of competition over and over as a metaphor for the Christian life. He even encourages us to strive to win.

The Puritan view of games and competition

A college friend of Hal's once challenged him on his knowledge of the Puritans, asking if he was aware of their teaching on games. Hal knew better than to form his whole conception on *The Scarlet Letter*, probably the limit of what most Americans think they know, but he had to admit the question stumped him. Weren't the Puritans too serious for amusements? The answer was yes, Puritans were serious, but they found a biblical rationale for entertainment and recreation, too. William Perkins wrote, in typically systematic fashion, that:

*Games may be divided into three sorts: games of wit or industry, games of hazard, and a mixture of both. Games of wit or industry are such as are ordered by the skill and industry of man. Of this sort are shooting in the longbow, shooting in the caliver [an early form of matchlock gun], running, wrestling, fencing, music, and the games of chess and draughts [which we call checkers] ... These, and all of this kind, wherein the industry of the mind and body hath the chiefest stroke, are **very commendable, and not to be disliked.**⁷*

So much for the kill-joy image of the Puritans. Young man, he says, rejoice in profitable, Christ-honoring competition – shoot, spar, and castle kingside for the glory of God!

Making competition a good part of our sons' lives

So, how can competition and the desire to compete be a good thing in our sons' lives?

For one thing, competition can be a tremendous motivating force for improvement. Our local homeschool support group does a Geography Bee that qualifies winners to compete at the state level of the National Geographic Bee. The first year, no one was particularly excited about it in advance, but then our oldest son came in second in our group. The next year he was determined to win. He did and passed the qualifying test for the state competition. Once there, he made it all the way to fourth place in the state. Well, the Youngs were hooked. Not only did John become passionate about learning geography, but all his brothers did, too. We have maps of the states and the world under plastic on our kitchen table (typical comment: "No, Hunan Province is located over there under the green beans.") and lots of atlases, globes, and more maps around the house. John eventually made it to number two in the state, and everyone after John has worked hard to compete in this area; his next two brothers have made it to the state competition as well. Folks often ask what we use to teach geography – even public school teachers, impressed by the homeschoolers' performance at the state competition – but we have to admit we don't, really. There's no need. The fun of competition has encouraged the boys to seek out and study geography far more than anything we could "teach" them. Our fourth son reads geography textbooks now because, as he said, he doesn't want to let the family down, despite our strong reassurances that we have no such expectation of him. The desire to compete, the hope to win has motivated them tremendously.

The same thing happened to us just last year. Our third son Matthew is the sports fan of the family, and last spring he talked his brothers into going out for contact football with a local

homeschool league in the fall. They had to come up with a huge amount of money – nearly \$900 for the four of them – to buy their equipment for the first year, and between saving all their birthday gifts and grabbing every bit of paying yard work and house cleaning they could, they managed to earn it all for themselves!

Once they began to play and were praised for their toughness, they were hooked. Boys who had tended to absorb themselves in books and computers on the couch suddenly burst into activity: exercising, watching what they ate, practicing and challenging one another in the yard. The competition did something for them which we were never able to impose on them effectively.

Academic incentive, too

You can use competition to motivate your boys in academics, too. Math has always been a trial for us at that 9-12 age range, especially. It seems like the boys could take hours to complete just one lesson. Some moms we know decided there were too many problems, so they just told their children to do all the odd or even problems. Melanie has a problem with this because math is an exercise that gets easier the more you do; it becomes automatic. One solution we found was to have the children compete against themselves. If they beat a personal best time in doing one lesson or on one fact sheet, they get a treat. Now our treats were never all that exciting – perhaps a couple of gummy bears or something more healthy. It was really just the competition and the fact there was a prize. It was amazing how much more quickly lessons would get done.

The boys invented a variation on this themselves. Even though all our children are in different levels of math, they found it really took about the same amount of time to do a lesson whether you were in the fourth grade or seventh grade book,⁸ so they would

compete to see who could finish their math lessons the fastest. You may be wondering if they would just race through and do the lesson poorly. Melanie said she never noticed much decrease in accuracy, if any, but there was a drastic *decrease* in doodling and staring out the window!⁹

Another type of competition is playing games within the family. For years our oldest children wanted to play board games, but it was hard because none of the little ones were able to hold their own in a game yet. We had to find a way to play as a family before everyone left home. We decided to have each of the older children or adults take a little partner. The little ones were delighted! All they really wanted to do was to throw the dice and move the “man”, so with an older child to plan strategy and a little one to make the moves, the older children were able to compete all out. This made everyone happy. It also built happy memories between the brothers and we soon began to see older children and younger children developing special relationships and wanting to be partners. This was a blessing to us.

We have a favorite all-family competition that we love to do at Hal’s mom’s lake camp. We all gather in the front room, sitting on chairs and piled all over the floor. We play charades with unusual topics: historical figures, songs and hymns, and movies (we are all into Christian filmmaking, so we’re film buffs). The one or two actors (this is a great place for little/big partnerships as well) stand up in the doorway of the eating area, which is raised a step. They tell us their category and act it out while we all guess. We have had a blast doing this. It is something everyone enjoys and the laurels do not always go to the oldest, either.

Lessons to teach and learn in competition

There are so many things to teach our sons in competition: remember Paul's admonition to play by the rules. We need to teach them good sportsmanship, to show love to one another even in victory or defeat. Our friend Earl Pendleton organized a football league for homeschoolers, now serving over seven hundred young athletes a year and even drawing players from out of state. One distinctive of his league is the emphasis on sportsmanship – winning teams don't gloat, losing teams don't sulk, and players never talk back to referees. When a player is hurt, both teams kneel where they are on the field and pray until the player is helped to the bench. One of the referees, a professional hired by the league, told one of our sons that he and his fellow officials loved to work the homeschool games because the attitudes were so much better than the other leagues they worked. Our sons can show a Christian testimony while competing as hard as they can.

Fortitude and endurance in reaching a goal is a good lesson of competition. You have to study spelling for many hours to prepare to compete in a Bee or run for many miles to prepare to win a race. The preparation is often boring or painful or time-consuming, though it is often the most valuable part of the process in how your life is impacted by what you learn, whether skills or knowledge or fitness. The thrill of competition can help our sons make it through this difficult personal development.

We can also teach them about teamwork. Teamwork needs patience with the weaknesses of others. Having younger partners really helps this one. Teamwork means a willingness to sacrifice your own desires for the betterment of the group. One of my sons dreamed of being a quarterback, but that is not where his team needed him – they need his bulk and strength on the line (even though a coach remarked, "Some of these linemen have a really good arm.") He has to learn to get over the disappointment and

do what's best for the team. That's a great preparation for adulthood. How many times do we as adults want something just for ourselves, just some "me time", but know that it isn't the best thing for the family? Getting up in the middle of the night to care for a baby or comfort a sick or frightened child, or even a father's getting up to leave for work before dawn, requires a willingness to lay down your own desires for the good of the family. Sons can begin to learn this in team play.

Families should be cautious about too much, too

Families, especially big ones, need to be cautious on the other side of this issue as well, though. There is such a thing as destructive competition, or maybe good competition that has a negative impact on the side. What is the balance? One season we decided our sons would play community baseball. At that time, we only had three sons old enough to play, but it nearly killed us. Their ages were just far enough apart that they played in three separate leagues; often practice and games were scheduled at conflicting times. We didn't have a meal together for weeks and were constantly separated, trying to make sure someone was at everyone's practice and game.

We couldn't keep that up past the first year, but we know families that pursue that kind of schedule from baseball to soccer to football to basketball – year round, and round and round. How do they maintain any family life outside the field and the bleachers?

One solution we found was to seek out homeschool leagues wherever possible. They often are more family-friendly, scheduling practices at the same time and location where possible, and grouping games to allow families with multiple ages to participate. Where there are no homeschool leagues, it may be a

ministry of sorts to organize one, or to seek out and recruit someone who can.

Another solution might be to limit your family to one ball season a year. What is doable for an eight-week sprint may wreck your family life if extended to back-to-back seasons.

What if there is no suitable league in your area, and no possibility of starting one? There are other competitive sports that only require two players, like tennis or racquetball, or can even be done solo like golf, cycling, or running, competing against the stopwatch or scorecard. Even things like canoeing, fishing, or hunting can be turned into a challenge to meet and surpass. Theodore Roosevelt was fond of taking visitors on straight-line walks, picking a distant landmark and committing to a beeline path – over, under, and through all obstacles, whether fences, creeks, rocks or farm buildings. The important thing is that your boys have an outlet to compete in, even against themselves, and a chance to use their bodies and get out and move. This really helps with too much testosterone in the house, too!

What if your son is “gifted”?

We have served on the board of our state homeschool association for many years, and there is an ongoing debate about whether homeschoolers should agitate for access to public school athletic programs. Our organization actually began organizing state conferences and championships to provide an outlet for families who were convinced their ninth grader was the next Michael Jordan or Kobe Bryant, and were thinking of ditching home education to be sure their student didn't miss out on high school locker room culture. Well, maybe that wasn't foremost in their thoughts, but it was straight ahead in their course of direction.

We parents have got to be the adults in this picture. Hal interviewed a high-ranking officer of our state's high school athletic association, who said that parents who were so optimistic often did not have a proper perspective about their child's talents. "The statistics say that less than one half of one percent of our students will go on to play at college at any level," he said. This association, by the way, oversees 150,000 high school athletes in a state that includes perennial athletic powerhouses like Duke University and the University of North Carolina. "The purpose" of high school athletics, he continued, "is not, and never has been, to prepare students to go on. It's an anomaly, and wonderful, if you do, but it's just a nice by-product. This is meant to build better citizens ... [and] provide a great learning laboratory to dedication and teamwork."¹⁰

In other words, if those statistics are accurate, there is only a 1 in 200 chance that a given student, boy or girl, who made the team in high school will ever have the opportunity to play ball in any sport, at any level of college; the chances for the professional level are smaller still. Even if that truly is possible, isn't it more important that they were grounded in the Word of God and disciplined by their fathers? That can't happen if they are so busy that they never really get to talk with their dads. Dads watching at practice is a good thing, but if that is all that happens between father and son, both of them have lost something valuable.

Conclusion

Competition is loved by boys and is often good for them. The Bible uses athletic competition as an analogy for the Christian life, with rules to obey, a struggle to overcome, and even a desire to come out on top of the field. It's not a bad thing at all, if kept in the proper perspective. A healthy spirit of competition can spur our sons to greater achievement, can build camaraderie in the

family and between friends, and can encourage them to step out for opportunities in business and ministry. It makes doing hard things more palatable and can teach some important life lessons as well. It's got to be directed in a godly way, though, and it has to be kept in proportion for our families. That's our job to manage.

Notes for Chapter 6

¹ Jeremiah 9:23-24

² Hebrews 12:1

³ Romans 12:10 (ESV)

⁴ 1 Corinthians 9:24

⁵ 2 Timothy 2:5

⁶ Romans 9:16

⁷ See “Recreation”, in I.D.E. Thomas, compiler, *The Golden Treasury of Puritan Quotations* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1989), pp. 232-233. Perkins goes on to distinguish between games of pure chance, of which he disapproves, and games which use dice or other tools of chance to represent the unknown factors of war or Providence, leaving the outcome of the game to skill. He offered four guidelines for making the best use of our recreational opportunities:

Rule 1. We are to make choice of recreations that are of least offense and best report.

Rule 2. Our recreations must be profitable to ourselves and others, and they must also tend to the glory of God.

Rule 3. The end of our recreation must be to refresh our bodies and minds.

Rule 4. Recreation must be moderate and sparing, even as the use of meat and drink and rest.

⁸ For what it's worth, we've used Saxon Math for most of grade levels.

⁹ This can work with adult males, too. Karl Rove, the chief of staff for President George W. Bush, wrote in the *Wall Street Journal* that for years, he and the president raced each other to see who could read the most books in a year. Rove started it as a new year's resolution and the president turned it into a contest. Rove said he always won, the president claiming he was busy leading the free world, but that Bush found the competition kept him focused; busy or not, Bush – who was a history major at Yale – typically finished a book a week while in office (“Bush is a book lover”, *WSJ*, 12/26/08).

¹⁰ Interview with Rick Strunk, associate executive director of the N.C. High School Athletic Association. His remarks were included in a story in the May 2009 issue of *Carolina Journal*, a publication of the John Locke Foundation in Raleigh, N.C.

