

## Rugby and Religion:

# The Great Game of Life

By Rex Morgan

**F**or an exciting, exhilarating six weeks, New Zealand was gripped by Rugby World Cup fever. Hordes of loyal fans converged on packed stadia, huge crowds gaped at giant screens in fan zones, tourists criss-crossed the country in campervans, pubs burst at the seams, flags and bunting magically sprouted up everywhere. It was six weeks of 'rugby heaven'.

'Heaven' is an appropriate description, in view of rugby's oft-observed status as the 'unofficial state religion' of New Zealand. And indeed rugby can be compared to religion in many ways.

Expensive grandstands soar into the air like cathedrals. Crowds of 'disciples' fill the 'pews', rising in unison to the Mexican waves and exulting at the thrilling plays. Punters coming from all over the world to view the matches are like pilgrims visiting holy sites, the 'hallowed turf' of famous grounds like Eden Park (a modern day 'Garden of Eden'? ). National anthems are sung with the stirring devotion of hymns of praise. The battle is intense; the fields are 'sprinkled with the sacrificial blood of the martyrs'. Top players and heroes of the past are adored like saints. The Webb-Ellis Cup is sought as desperately as the Holy Grail.

A painting of Jesus as an All Black was displayed at Wellington's Cathedral of St Paul during the tournament. Artist Don Little said that he had painted the piece after wondering



whether rugby had become the new religion in a country that had largely turned away from the faith. An Australian rugby fan purchased the picture.<sup>1</sup>

Religious historian Professor Peter Lineham, speaking to Kim Hill on national radio summed it up succinctly: 'Rugby is not just a game. It's a religion'.<sup>2</sup>

It is interesting to note also that New Zealand is by no means alone in this regard. A quick Google search shows people in South Africa, Australia, Ireland, Wales, England, and France have also likened the game with the oval ball to a national religion!

### Notre Dame du Rugby

One remarkable example of the religious overtones associated with rugby is found at a chapel in France called 'Notre Dame du Rugby'.

The church is decorated with hundreds of rugby shirts in glass cabinets. Four stained-glass windows feature images of the Virgin Mary in various rugby poses, including a line-out, a scrum, and a cradling of the

infant Jesus with a rugby ball in his hands. A framed prayer at the altar translates into English:

Virgin Mary, who taught your child Jesus to play at your knee, keep a maternal watch over the game of these grown-up children.

Be with us also in the great scrum of existence, so that we may come out winners in the great game of life, giving an example—as on the field—of courage, zest and team spirit, in the word of an ideal in your name. Amen.

References to 'the great scrum of existence' and 'the great game of life' can serve to move our focus from the limited arena of the game of rugby to the far more important issue of life in the real world.

While rugby is spectacular, having its triumphs and challenges, in the end it is 'just a game', providing only a temporary escape from the serious business of life. When it comes to the business end of life, rugby doesn't have the answers we need.



*Richie McCaw, All Blacks captain, is all smiles as he stands with the Webb-Ellis Cup, the trophy awarded to the winner of the Rugby World Cup.*

It was wonderful to see the All Blacks win the coveted trophy, but in four years' time the prize will be up for grabs again. This is one aspect where religious faith promises so much more than sport. Rugby games are over all too soon; wins are recorded, but the teams must play again. The glory of victory soon wears off, as it is eventually followed by inevitable defeat. Christianity, on the other hand, has to do with eternal, spiritual things, and promises lasting benefits—a trophy that will 'never fade away'.<sup>3</sup>

Don't get me wrong—rugby is wonderful as recreation. It is an exciting diversion that is rightly played with vigour and followed with passion. The Rugby World Cup was a series of wonderful spectacles that enthralled and inspired the nation—the stadium of 4.5 million'. But wasn't it only a diversion from the real business of

life? The fervour of sports conquest soon wears off in the cold hard light of issues like economic uncertainty, relationship problems, crime, education, and natural disasters.

To face these aspects of life we need something more substantial than a game in a sports stadium. We need a power that plays out in the stadium of everyday life.

We read about a power that does just that in the Holy Bible. And believe it or not, the Bible itself makes close comparisons between sports events and religion. It shows the way that principles learned in physical sports like rugby can be utilised in our everyday living. Of course, rugby was unknown at the time, but the Bible highlights examples from the sports of the day: boxing, wrestling, and athletics.

### **Rugby Strategies Applied to Life**

The New Testament writer Paul brought out the principle that while there are many competitors in a running race, only one can be the winner.<sup>4</sup> He recommends we should all live the whole of our lives in such a way as to win a prize. And he points out a welcome difference between sport and life: in the game of life there is no limit on how many people can be winners.

Paul suggests we should all learn lessons from the strict training that athletes undertake. Players are willing to spend many hours each week in rigorous workouts in the quest to represent their country in a rugby game. Shouldn't this inspire us to put our own great effort into living life in a moral and honourable way, endeavouring to show love to all around us, to help and serve others, and to build lasting relationships?

# Christians Who Play Rugby

Nineteen sports chaplains were in attendance at the Rugby World Cup to offer pastoral care, a quiet prayer, or simply a cup of coffee. Dave Chawner, British coordinator for Rugby Union Chaplaincy stated: 'At least 25% of the squads involved in the tournament had some sort of regular prayer and/or Bible study'.<sup>1</sup>

A surprising number of international rugby players are committed Christians. The legendary Michael Jones, widely recognised as one of the greatest players of all time, was so committed to his faith that he even refused to play games on Sundays. Jones says: 'Although I am truly honoured to represent New Zealand on the rugby field, my first allegiance is definitely to my Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. People easily forget a player after he stops playing, but one thing I'd like to be remembered for is that I was a person who put God first before rugby'.

Once asked how a Christian like he could be such an uncompromising tackler, Jones famously quipped back with a Bible principle: 'It is better to give than to receive'!

One of the crowd favourites of the World Cup-winning All Blacks was Brad Thorn. He is another legendary figure, a 'dual international' who has played both rugby league for Australia and rugby union for New Zealand. Thorn became a Christian after asking a fellow team mate (Kangaroos front-row forward Jason Stevens) on a trip to the UK in 1997 why he didn't get involved with all the money, girls, and alcohol that come with top level rugby league.

'Jason stood out from the rest of the team', Thorn said. 'On tour we would cut loose and he didn't. When you are in a group, everyone says you are weak to not go on the beers, weak if you haven't slept with a woman. It's the opposite. Character is involved.'

Christianity doesn't prevent this big man from highly physical performances where he delivers bone-crushing tackles and aggressive driving charges. 'Before I play, I say a simple prayer, honouring God through the way I play, 100% aggression and physicality, but showing respect to your opponent afterwards whether I win or lose.'

Comparing rugby and religion, Thorn says: 'The things that help you be successful in football are to be humble, because that's how you learn; to persevere; to sacrifice for others, because the team's more important than yourself; to show courage; to show wisdom; and to be honest with your teammates. All of these things that are Christ's real nature seem to be the key things that make you successful in football'.<sup>2</sup>

Another player in the 2011 World Cup, Springbok Pierre Spies, shared his story in a recent book, *More Than Rugby*. One of the most imposing and explosive loose forwards that South Africa has ever produced, Spies makes no secret of the personal importance of his Christian faith. On his website he states: 'My message to you is that God has a plan for your life. He has a passion for you. Once you have decided to follow Him and live for Him, He will do more for you than you ever could have imagined'.

Inundated with invitations to appear as a guest speaker, Spies uses every opportunity to inspire young and old, not with talk of sport, but of life, faith, family, and love. He married the girl of his dreams, Juanne, in December 2008 and their dedication to Christ and Christian values serves as an example to young and old alike.<sup>3</sup>

Scottish representative in the 2007 and 2011 Rugby World Cups, Euan Murray is another player who has put his faith first and sport second by declining to play on Sundays. 'There is something far more important in life than the result of a game', he says.

These and many other players make no secret of the fact that they are devoted Christians, and that their religious faith has helped them not only in the arena of rugby, but much more importantly, in the great game of life.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Challenge Weekly*, 31 October 2011, p. 3

<sup>2</sup> *Challenge Weekly*, 29 August 2011, p. 16

<sup>3</sup> [www.pierrespies.co.za](http://www.pierrespies.co.za)



One of the Bible writers uses the image of spectators watching an athletic contest to spur his readers on to living a life free of sin.<sup>5</sup> Paul told his young co-worker Timothy that physical exercise benefits the body for a short while, but godliness—focusing on the ethical, moral, and spiritual aspects of life—is much more worthwhile because it brings promise of a better life beyond the grave, as well as benefitting our life right now.<sup>6</sup>

How can we have victory in the spiritual game of life? The Bible's answer is to look towards Jesus, the great champion who showed us the way to eternal life.<sup>7</sup>

Just as the All Blacks have a captain who leads from the front, Richie McCaw, so Jesus is a pace-setting spiritual leader—'the captain of our salvation'.<sup>8</sup>

Another sporting principle expounded by Paul is that of teamwork. The All Blacks display a blended mixture of players of different types. The nimble, speedy back line works in unison with the heavier, more solid forward pack, each player using his special skills for the benefit of the whole team. Similarly, in society at large, people have differing abilities,

opportunities, and viewpoints. Only by fitting in with others can we play to our best in the great game of life.

Paul cites the humorous illustration that if all of our body was an eye or an ear, for instance, how would we be able to eat or walk?<sup>9</sup>

Similarly, not everyone in a rugby team can be the goal kicker. Some of the All Blacks are forwards, some are wings, some are kickers, some sit out a game on the bench, but they all have their part to play in the team. We have our individual part to play in the game of life, and can help ourselves and others by being willing to tolerate and assist those who are different from us.

It was wonderful to see how New Zealanders as Rugby World Cup hosts supported the teams from other countries. Kiwis not only encouraged their own team, but warmly welcomed visitors from other nations and proudly displayed a variety of national flags. One of the primary teachings of the Bible is that humans are all one in God's sight.<sup>10</sup> How wonderful if we were as generous and accommodating of others in all of our relationships, not just at Rugby World Cup time!

### World In Union

The admirable sentiments called up in the Rugby World Cup theme song, 'World in Union', are strikingly similar to those found in Christianity:

Gathering together,  
one mind, one heart  
Every creed, every colour,  
once joined, never apart  
It's the world in union,  
the world as one  
As we climb to reach our destiny,  
a new age has begun.

This could easily be a hymn sung in church. And indeed, that is a more likely place than a rugby field for these aspirations to be brought to their ultimate fulfilment. Christians aim to practice a life expressing values such as generosity, justice, truth, honesty, integrity, and love.

These are characteristics of the nature of God, who selected us all as participants in the great game of life. He gave us a coaching manual, the Bible, to show us how to 'play'. The game plan God lays out for us there opens up an understanding of life that rivals, and even surpasses, the thrill of rugby games. And it is capped off at the end with the golden trophy of eternal life.

If you would like to learn more about the joy of participating in the spiritual game of life, why not visit a church this weekend? Or, please feel free to write to us for more information.<sup>11</sup>

Wouldn't it be great if we could all pay as much attention to the 'great scrum of existence', the 'great game of life', as we do to a comparatively short-lived and insignificant game of rugby!

This would truly make the world a better place.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> *Challenge Weekly*, 10 October 2011
- <sup>2</sup> Interview on Radio NZ National, 24 September 2011
- <sup>3</sup> 1 Peter 5:4 (All scriptures from NIV unless stated otherwise.)
- <sup>4</sup> 1 Corinthians 9:24
- <sup>5</sup> Hebrews 12:1
- <sup>6</sup> 1 Timothy 4:7-8 (KJV)
- <sup>7</sup> Hebrews 12:1-2
- <sup>8</sup> Hebrews 2:10 (KJV)
- <sup>9</sup> 1 Corinthians 12:12-18
- <sup>10</sup> Galatians 3:28
- <sup>11</sup> Write to *Inside Life*, PO Box 304055, Hauraki Corner, Auckland 0750.



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