

Sports Ministry by Chris Hitzelberger

Young people in our part of the country are highly involved in sports. Many of them play on multiple sports teams year round, follow sports on television and the internet, and devote much of their free time to the subject. I have found that some teens spend more time interacting with sports coaches than they do with their own parents! If we are called to meet young people where they are, this means often engaging them through the medium of sports. I have found sports ministry to be a great tool for reaching out to young people and helping them connect their faith with their everyday life.

The purpose of sports ministry is to bring young people to a deeper relationship with Christ and each other through sports. Athletic ability is secondary in ministry: what you need is a willing heart. In fact, sports ministry doesn't always need to involve actively playing sports. Below are some suggestions on how to introduce sports into your parish ministry.

- A common issue among many parish teens is the fear of inviting friends to youth ministry events. Their friends are too busy or may not be into “the church thing”. One great outreach ministry is to gather a few youth who are involved and show up at a sporting event where some of their friends are playing. If you cannot commit to the whole game, show up for the second half. Make sure the teen sees you there- bring a banner, cheer for them, etc. After the game, make sure to say hi. It can especially leave a lasting impression (particularly for male athletes) if you show up with some fast food for after the game. Use that first connection to then invite that teen to an upcoming event. Once they see that you are willing to meet them where they are, they are more willing to meet you on your turf.
- Perhaps playing sports seems a little daunting. Sports can be introduced through other mediums. Have a movie night. Think about showing a great sports movie like “Remember the Titans”, “Miracle”, or even “Rocky”. Add an inspirational book or two written by a Christian athlete to your book shelf. The video series ‘Champions for Christ’ documents professional baseball players who are also active in their Catholic faith. Using a sports video clip or story in a talk can be another easy way to reach out to teens who love sports.
- Most parish youth ministry programs have those teens who only come sporadically to events that the CYM wants for them to come more regularly. Plan some short physical game that can be added to a meeting at the last minute and save it for a night when a few of those teens show up. This can pique their interest and encourage them to come back to the next event or meeting you are having.
- Many parishes participate in the Northern Virginia Junior Catholic Youth Organization sports program. Most parishes have a volunteer who coordinates these activities. As a CYM, you could meet with the coordinator and offer to give a special training session for coaches to assist them in growing their coaching into a ministry. You can provide simple tips, such as how to pray with young people, how to encourage them, where to direct them when they have serious concerns or questions about their faith. Even showing up at a practice to introduce yourself can help the young people feel a stronger connection to the parish and see their basketball team as something more than just a team.

- Organizing a parish-wide sports tournament may seem a little daunting, but it can be a great way to reach out to young people. Connect with a CYM who has been running a tournament for several years and plan to observe their tournament to see how it works. Do not re-invent the wheel: ask to borrow fliers, permission slips, and other ideas from them for your own event.
- Create a ‘sports night’ on a monthly basis. You could offer the same sport each month, or rotate among a variety of sports. Talk to young people and encourage them to bring their friends. Carry a handful of fliers around with you and when you meet a young person, give them one and invite them to come. These types of events can start with as few as four or five people and quickly grow.
- Always share the Gospel. While we are comfortable talking about our faith in a formal meeting, it might require something more creative on the sports field. Handing out a half page reflection at the end of the game, or relating a headline from the sporting world to the weekly Gospel reading might be a more effective means of reaching a young person.
- Don’t be afraid to involve ‘non-parish youth’ into sports programs. Sports can be a great tool of evangelization to all sorts of youth.
- Don’t be afraid to pray. Even if you are having a basketball night or meeting with NVJCYO coaches, start off with a prayer. Encourage others to offer intentions.

In all of these ideas, the important point is that you, as the CYM, need to get involved with the young people. It doesn’t matter if you are awful at basketball or were always picked last in gym class. What really matters is that you are willing to dive into something outside your comfort zone. If you take that first step, it can and will encourage young people to take a similar step.

Chris Hitzelberger is the Coordinator of Youth Ministry at Blessed Sacrament Church in Alexandria, VA.