

Institute for Christian Teaching  
Education Department of Seventh-day Adventist

**“Seventh-day Adventist Intercollegiate Competition:  
A North American Perspective”**

by Bruce G. Peifer, M. S.

Assistant Professor  
Department of Physical Education  
Oakwood College  
Huntsville, Al

**300-97 Institute for Christian Teaching  
12501 Old Columbia Pike  
Silver Spring, MD 20904**

Prepared for the  
20<sup>th</sup> International Faith and Learning Seminar  
held at  
Loma Linda University, Loma Linda, California, U.S.A.  
June 15 - 27, 1997

### Introduction

Interscholastic competition in the United States started in 1869 with the first football game between Rutgers and Princeton Universities. The remainder of the 1800's brought competition from simple contests to big business with coaches and players receiving salaries (Hilde, 1980). Throughout the 1900's competitive sport in the public and private college systems has had support as well as opposition. Those supporting interscholastic sport see its virtues as a tool to sharpen the Mind and a learning experience that will enhance the ability to compete in life's struggles (Miller, 1981). Those opposed to competition see it as a stress inducing activity (Connell, 1981), as well as a contest, where there is a winner and a loser. "Both parties gamble to be the winner" (Muth, 1966).

The Seventh-day Adventist Church began addressing the question of competition in the late 1800's. Ellen White wrote extensively on the detrimental effects of rivalry in the schools. The current denominational stand opposing interscholastic sport has been formulated by the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. Their resources for this stand come from the writings of Ellen G. White, scriptural interpretation and selected church statements, such as "Co-operation not competition is the Christian goal" (Harker, 1978).

Support for the denominational position has changed in the past few years in the Seventh-day Adventist schools. The application of the principles for the involvement in interscholastic competition has not been universally agreed upon. The demarcation line between that which is

acceptable and that which is harmful is not always clearly discernable. Hence, in the colleges and universities of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, numerous attitudes and practices have been observed. In the North American Division of Seventh-day Adventists, colleges and universities are incorporating athletic programs into the regular co-curricular offerings. In some instances, interscholastic competition is fostered between friendly sister Seventh-day Adventist schools. On a more prevalent scale, contests with neighboring non-Seventh-day Adventist institutions is taking place. It does appear, however, that the consumption of time in operating an athletic program has become a major concern of these institutions when organizing funded, competitive interscholastic teams or clubs on a continuing basis. Moore (1978) writes that calling competition bad is just an excuse for avoiding it and that time as an involvement that is necessary for success in any endeavor.

While we tend to see competition in each phase of life and education, the area of competitive sports has been viewed as the example of how competition can be negative. It appears that a wider base of input may be needed in establishing a working policy on competition. At this point there is no data indicating the extent to which athletic professionals in the Seventh-day Adventist college system support or practice the existing policy on intercollegiate competition. Providing a clear picture of where the North American Division stands on the question of athletic competition at the college and university levels may shed light on the entire world church view of competition for the future. This concept even reaches past the Seventh-day Adventist view of the world, to a view of society that touches all of our lives. "The psychological affects of athletic competition on children may influence them throughout their entire lives" (Seefeldt, 1980).

### **The Purpose**

The purpose of this paper is to help provide a concise picture of where the Seventh-day Adventist leaders and athletic professionals stand on interscholastic competition and how it relates to their faith. As the future quickly becomes present, the question of interscholastic competition increases. A firm understanding of the direction the church will follow can very well be influenced by the knowledge and input of the athletic professionals within the system. The paper will note to what degree athletic professionals follow the policies set forth by the Seventh-day Adventist Church. This paper will further concern itself with the extent to which Seventh-day Adventist leaders, athletic professionals, and collegiate physical educators subscribe to and support standard denominational principles concerning interscholastic competition. The intent is to discover the following:

1. Standard denominational principles as expressed in the writings of Ellen White and by selected church leaders in relation to interscholastic competition.
2. The extent to which the current church leaders, athletic professionals, and physical educators favor or oppose interscholastic sport in Seventh-day Adventist colleges.
3. A possible direction for the future in the area of interscholastic competition in the Seventh-day Adventist Colleges in the North American Division.

To establish the minimum bounds of credibility, the scope of this paper will be limited to North American Seventh-day Adventist colleges and universities that have been in existence for a minimum of ten years. (La Sierra University included separate from Loma Linda University)

It is assumed that, the college leaders and athletic professionals that were contacted for this paper are all Seventh-day Adventist with a reasonable awareness of the church's position on competition. As employees of the church, the leaders and athletic professional, may have felt reluctant to openly express opinions that are hostile to or in contradiction with the established dictates of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. Under these circumstances, efforts were made to verify the actual level of participation in athletic competition in which each college or university engages. It is also assumed that the writings and articles examined in this paper are from sources that are supported by the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The Seventh-day Adventist principles presented will represent the official positions of the Church. These principles will be taken from the document *Statements, Guidelines and other Documents* (1988).

#### Definitions of terms

There are many ways to define terms in athletics that may be misconstrued in other disciplines and professions. An attempt will be made here to define some of the language used in competition and athletics with the help of the American Heritage Dictionary. The word *athletics* is simply defined as "the playing of organized games." In contrast, the word *amusements* is defined as "activities such as sports and games." Ellen White (1884), adds to the dictionary definition "the engaging in many forms of activities including, shows, lectures, and other entertainments."

American Heritage also defines *competition* as “a contest for some prize or advantage,” and *cooperation* as “to work or act toward a common end or purpose.” Colleges and universities that engage in athletic contests with other institutions of higher learning are said to have competed at the *intercollegiate* level. Any school, regardless of the size that plays games against another school is said to have been involved in an *interscholastic* competition. Ellen White indicates that this intercollegiate/interscholastic competition fosters *rivalry* -- “the act of competing or emulating.” Two other important terms that must be defined are *intramural sport*-- “organized games that occur on one campus involving only students or groups from that campus”-- and *recreation*, which is defined as “refreshment of the mind or body after work through activity that amuses or stimulates; play.” The last of the terms that will be defined here is the term *strife*. *Strife* is defined as “contention or competition between rivals”. For the use of this paper, *strife* will be used with the Biblical emphasis found in Proverbs 17: 14.

### The Arguments

Interscholastic competition, which is common place in the secular school system has come under intense scrutiny by many different authors associated with the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Representative bibliographies can be found in *The Journal of Adventist Education* (1988), Hilde (1980), and Muth (1966). These authors are divided into two very distinct categories. First, There are those that firmly believe Seventh-day Adventists should not be involved in competitive athletics for any reason. The second group believes that athletic competition is the only way to develop our young people for the life trials ahead. Inconsistency in Seventh-day Adventist

colleges' and universities' application of the policy on competition is cited by both those who do not favor competition, as well as those who favor competition. Following are the arguments on both sides of the issue.

### Opposing Competition

Writers that indicate the negative aspects of competition other than the writings of Ellen White include, Connell (1980) who sees the level of stress that one must deal with increase as the level of competition rises and Harker (1978), who suggests that competitive sport does not meet the requirements for exercise. Harker goes on to indicate that the split second timing required in a competitive setting does not leave time to make a prudent Christian decision. Martin (1975) saw that losers of basketball contests and wrestling matches showed increased levels of aggressive behavior.

The comparison of competition to gambling is made by Muth (1966) in a compiled statement in *The Journal of Adventist Education* (1988). She shows that in all contests there is a winner and a loser. Any time a person takes part in a win-lose situation they are gambling on the outcome of the contest, and their ability to perform.

Ellen White's influence on the subject is wide spread. She writes that players become infatuated with sport and become lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God. She also talks of competition in terms of rivalry. *Selected Messages* (Book 1) states, "When all selfishness is dead, when there

is no rivalry... then will the shower of the grace of the Holy Spirit come". Although Ellen White does not condemn the simple exercise of playing ball, she does however, in *The Adventist Home* state that playing ball even in its simplicity may be overdone. Other publications by Ellen White regarding recreation include *Counsels to Teachers, Parents, and Students*, the book *Education*, and selected works from the *Testimonies*.

Some of the writers that tend to favor competition quote Ellen White in their attempt to justify competition. Dr. William Jarvis, a health professor at Loma Linda University writes, "Ellen White frequently refers negatively to rivalry and emulation, however, it is interesting to note that not one of Ellen G. White's statements against rivalry are in direct reference to sports, recreation, or physical education".

#### Favoring Competition

Development of lifetime attitudes through competition is advocated by Longly (1974) and Hilde (1988). Hastad (1978) indicates that competition among youngsters helps in their development of certain motor skills and eye hand coordination. Children with learning problems have also shown improvement through the use of competition and praise (Arnheim, 1995).

Moore (1978) cites Matthew 25:14-30 -- the story of the three servants given five talents, two talents, and one talent. He interprets the first two servants that doubled their talents as good competitors. He sees the servant that buried his talent as a man who is afraid to compete.

“People who call competition bad are using that as an excuse to avoid competition.” (Moore 1978) Dr. William J. Napier, retired professor from Loma Linda University, uses the term “to compete with” as opposed to “to compete against” in what he calls the “good strife” and the “bad strife” in relation to competition. The apostle Paul also mentions this concept in I Timothy 6:12 “Fight the good fight of faith.” (emphasis supplied) Indicating that there must be two types of fight, good and bad.

A majority of Seventh-day Adventists who favor competition tend to use as one of their arguments, “competition is a part of everyday life.” Hilde (1980), believes that each and every day we must compete -- in our social life, family life, and even in our survival needs. We may take this thought one step further by saying that competition is a fact of life because life has been a struggle since the curse (Genesis 3: 17-19), and will be until all things are made new (Revelation 21: 5). Ellen White (1881) wrote an entire article on comparing the Christian struggle to a race. The article was entitled “The Christian Race.” She indicates that in the Roman race, a prize was set before the runners to motivate them. “So the heavenly goal is presented to the view of the Christian, that it may have its just influence, and inspire him with zeal and ardor.” Ellen White, uses this article on competition to inspire positive Christian living. The competition model is used by many leaders, preachers, teachers, lecturers, and other professionals as analogous stories in attempts to make a point about their particular passion.

### The Present

Presently in the North American Division, college athletics are a part of the educational system. The institutions that have organized programs must follow the governmental standards set forth by many different organizations such as the NCAA (National Collegiate Athletic Association), the NAIA (National Association of Interscholastic Athletics), and the NCCAA (National Christian College Athletic Association). The Knight Commission (1993), set up by the government of the United States, giving guidelines and suggestions on ways to clean up athletics, suggest that the “one-plus-three” model be utilized. In this model the president of the institution controls athletics, with academic integrity, financial integrity, and independent certification as the system of checks and balances. The Knight commission goes on to say that their report was “an effort to keep faith with the student athlete.” These bodies and commissions have attempted to present a picture of athletics that will encourage students to believe or have faith in a structure of major collegiate sports. “Business as usual in college sports will undermine American higher education. It leads inexorably to regulation of intercollegiate athletics by the courts or Congress. This is a consequence that no one wants, but many, unwittingly, may invite.” (Knight commission 1993)

The Seventh-day Adventist colleges and universities in the North American Division engage in some type of athletic program. These programs range from intramural participation only to low level Christian friendship games to athletic programs that are aligned with large national associations with major funding and athletic scholarships.

The following table shows each of the Seventh-day Adventist colleges and universities in the North American Division, and their involvement in athletics. Also noted, is the number of years that an institution has been involved and its highest level of competition.

**Athletics: North American Division of Seventh-day Adventist Colleges and Universities**

Name of Institution	Intramural	Athletics	National Association	League	Comments	years
Andrews University	Yes	No	No	No	City League Teams	5+
Atlantic Union College	Yes	Yes	NAIA	Yes		5+
Columbia Union College	Yes	Yes	NCAA (div II)	Yes		5+
Canadian Union College	No	No	No	No	No Information	0
La Sierra University	Yes	Yes	NAIA (div II)	No		5+
Loma Linda University	Yes	No	No	No	No Teams	0
Oakwood College	Yes	No	No	No	Recruitment team	5+
Pacific Union College	Yes	Yes	NAIA (div I)	Yes		5+
Southern University	Yes	No	No	No	Gymnastics Team	0
Southwestern Adventist	Yes	Yes	NAIA (div II)	Yes		1
Union College	Yes	Yes	No	No	Fellowship of Christian Athletes	5+
Walla Walla College	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Independent league affiliation	2

*Statements, Guidelines and other Documents* (pg 18) states that the Seventh-day Adventist World Church does not support interscholastic competition between Adventist institutions. Although the Seventh-day Adventist church created and published this policy, it appears from the previous table that the proverbial horse is out of the barn. The colleges and universities that are controlled by the North American Division and their respective unions are involved in an ongoing pilot program, started in 1989, that allows each conference to decide whether or not to engage in athletic competition. However, the colleges and universities that are controlled by the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists are not involved, to a great extent, in athletic competition. The world church, does condone the occasional friendship game between schools and the General Conference institutions abide by this ruling.

### The Future

Because of the wide spread involvement and the entrenchment of these North American Division athletic programs into the curriculum of the colleges, the paramount questions are, Why do these institutions compete? What is their motivation for starting an athletic program? Why are they so entrenched into the co-curricular part of their institutions? The possible answer to these questions may come from the changing social environment in which the North American Division functions. Ellen White suggests in the book *Education* (pg 210) that

Some of the most popular amusements, such as football and boxing, have become schools of brutality. They are developing the same characteristics as did the games of Rome. The love of domination, the pride in mere brute force, the reckless disregard of life, are exerting upon the youth a power to demoralize that is appalling. Other athletic games, though not so brutalizing, are scarcely less

objectionable, because of the love of pleasure and excitement, thus fostering a distaste for useful labor, a disposition to shun practical duties and responsibilities and its tranquil enjoyments. Thus the door is opened to dissipation and lawlessness, with their terrible results.

In *Counsels to Parents, Teachers and Students* (pg 83) Ellen White says “There should be rules regulating the studies of children and youth to certain hours, and then a portion of their time should be spent in physical labor.” Our current environment does not support the notion of useful labor and practical duties as an alternative for physical development. The Seventh-day Adventist colleges and universities have closed down many of the physical labor activities. Printing operations have closed, farms, dairies and laundries no longer function on the campuses. Even the agriculture programs have been eliminated from the education curriculum. The colleges and universities are replacing these physical labor activities with competitive athletics.

Even with this possible explanation of why, one question remains. The question of “What”, as in “What to do now”? In an attempt to answer this question there is a tendency to look at the particular sport, competition, or result of the activity and not the leadership. The persons that are holding positions of leadership in respect to competition must take responsibility for these programs. Ellen White addresses this question in her statements in *Messages to Young People* (pg 38)

Christians have many sources of happiness at their command, and they may tell with unerring accuracy what pleasures are lawful and right. *They may enjoy such recreations as will not dissipate the mind or debase the soul, such as will not disappoint, and leave a sad after-influence to destroy self-respect or bar the way to usefulness.* If they can take Jesus with them, and maintain a prayerful spirit, they are perfectly safe.

Clearly, Ellen White is putting the awesome responsibility of providing physical activities for our

young people in the hands of leaders that glorify God. Regardless of the activity chosen, the Christian trained leadership should become the focus. “I do not condemn the simple exercise of playing ball: but this, even in its simplicity, may be overdone. (White, 1952) This is a call for leadership to be the controlling influence with our young people concerning competition.

Emphasis on leadership may change the present face of acceptable physical activities on the North American Division college and university campuses. Proper leadership would mean including adult, non-student leaders to each intramural team. Including leadership would also mean putting adult non-student leaders on city and church league teams. Colleges and universities would have to expand their physical education programs to include Christian coaching preparation classes, Adventist leadership classes and ongoing monitoring systems. Most of all, true leadership in athletics would mean incorporating a structure of coaches, administrators and staff personnel to ensure the constant interjection of Jesus into the programs.

With proper leadership, training of leadership, and monitoring of that leadership, the athletic programs at the Seventh-day Adventist colleges and universities could in fact be in alignment with the teachings of the church as delivered by Ellen White. Without proper leadership the pitfalls and logical conclusions are evident in the statement from Ellen White in *Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students*. (Pg 83) “Diligent study is essential, so also is diligent hard work. **PLAY IS NOT ESSENTIAL.**”

Ellen White makes the statement in *Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students* (354) “but the

Lord has declared that the better way is for them to get physical exercise through manual training, and by letting useful employment take the place of selfish pleasure.” Is it possible that now in 1997, manual training is the learning and perfecting of lifetime sports, such as golf, tennis, running, engaging in team games, and competition for the physical well being of the whole person? And perhaps useful employment includes the disciplines of physical education, recreation, wellness, and athletics, where Adventist brothers and sisters may be gainfully employed in the work and service of the Lord. “Without a doubt, then, the contribution that one’s physical condition makes to our academic and spiritual growth is unquestionable.”

(Hammerslough 1993)

Studies need to be done in this area soon. The need for a definitive answer to this discussion is imperative. Each day that there continues to be opposing ideas between the various groups within the church, the gap of understanding will widen without the benefit of general consensus and support.

### **Proposed Guidelines for Seventh-day Adventist Athletics**

There is a need for Christian structure in the existing athletic programs that are in place in the Seventh -day Adventist colleges/universities throughout the North American Division. Many of the collegiate programs are members of national organizations that have established rules for involvement in competitive athletics. These organizations (National Collegiate Athletic Association, National Association of Interscholastic Athletics, National Christian Collegiate

Athletic Association) address many aspects of competition which make administration of the athletic programs consistent and unified. They do not dictate who an institution competes with, merely where, and how often. These institutions do however, set down minimum and maximum limits regarding academic eligibility, number of games played in each sport, the time frames for each sport season, and the amount of financial aid given to student athletes. Although guidelines are given by the national organizations, they are designed as minimum standards. Colleges and universities are not only allowed to set higher standards than the organizations require, they are encouraged to do so. The Seventh-day Adventist colleges and universities may use this concept to establish the highest Christian standards possible for the involvement of students in the athletic setting.

The following are some suggestions for keeping a higher Christian Seventh-day Adventist standard not covered by the national organizations:

**Keep the athletic program within the range and scope of the institution:**

The athletic programs on the Adventist college/university campus should be renewed yearly by the athletic and/or physical education departments and the administration of the institution.

Throughout the course of the school year, the athletic program and athletic leaders should be supervised by an appropriate officer(s) of the administration. This administrator(s) should report directly to the institution's president.

**Use of the slow growth concept:**

To ensure a quality Christian program, each institution should build its program at a slow rate. Make the athletic program part of the educational experience. The program should not replace the academic, social or spiritual part of the student's life. The college/university should create an approach to athletics that reflects the mission and goals of that institution. The sports program must be flexible enough to be expanded or reduced to meet the changing needs of the institution, not the athletic department. Any change in the program -- addition or deletion of a sport or altering the level of play -- should be done in small steps. This slow growth approach will increase the stability of the overall program. Constant inclusion of the Adventist philosophy, reviewing of the coaches' religious and institutional commitment each year, and keeping worship as part of the practice/game routine will keep the spiritual component as an active part of the program.

**Regulate athletic scholarship:**

There have been many documented cases of scholarshiping problems in the public and private collegiate system. (NCAA, 1985) The seventh-day Adventist institutions must make a concerted effort to avoid the pitfalls of big time athletic scholarshiping. Working within the structure of the college/university's financial aid structure and not the minimums set by the national organizations is one way to control this aspect of competition. Schools that use this approach attract students who enjoy athletics, not athletes who do not care about academics. (NCAA 1985)

**Train Professional Leaders:**

There are many institutions of higher learning that incorporate educational degrees, tracts, and certifications for the specific purpose of developing knowledgeable, professional athletic coaches. As stated earlier in this paper, focusing on this aspect of an intercollegiate athletic program can not be over emphasized. Study, preparation, and prayer are essential for the start, development, maintenance, and control of a Seventh-day Adventist college/university sports program.

**Suggested Athletic Policies:**

Outside of the national rules, the Seventh-day Adventist institution standards, and the athletic departments policies, there are some suggested additional requirements that may be included for athletic involvement in a Seventh-day Adventist institution.

1. Requiring that a team be involved in a consecration service at the beginning of each sport season and that the athletes be given credit for incorporating team worship as part of their practice schedule.
2. Requiring that an athlete represent the College/University in their dress and decorum at all times, on and off the campus.
3. Infraction of institutional policies result in the loss of athletic eligibility before any other campus consequences are enforced.

There are many possible tools that can be used in controlling and supporting an athletic program including ad hoc athletic committees, regulatory boards, specific participatory rules, professional preparation and upgrading for coaches, and most of all the constant interjection of Jesus Christ into the programs. Competition in the North American Division of Seventh-day Adventists on the collegiate/university level exists. With positive established leadership, properly trained young athletes and Jesus as the center of the programs, competitive intercollegiate athletic programs in the North American Division of Seventh-day Adventist can be a safe and a Christ glorifying experience for the college students.

## References

- Arnheim, J. *Adapted Physical Education*. Detroit, MI: Mosby Publishing, 1995
- Connell, Kathleen. *Influences of Competition on Anxiety Levels of Women's Intercollegiate Basketball Players*. Thesis (M.S.) Springfield College, 1976
- Hammerslough, Walter. *Physical Education and Sport from a Christian Perspective*. Unpublished paper presented at the International Faith and Learning Seminar, Union College, Lincoln, NB. June 1993
- Harker, W. *Strange Fire: Christianity and the Rise of Modern Olympics*. Rapiden, VA: Heartland Press, 1996
- Hastad, B. *Eye hand Coordination and competition*. Unpublished thesis (M.S.) Ohio State University, 1983
- Holms, S. *Learning Disabilities and the Athlete*. Unpublished thesis (M.S.) Ohio State University, 1978
- Knight Foundation. *A new beginning for a new century, Interscholastic Athletics*. Commission on Interscholastic Athletics in the U.S.A. March 1993
- Martin, Dennis. *A Biblical Doctrine of Physical Education*. Dissertation (Ed.D) University of North Carolina at Greensbourogh, 1983
- Miller, David. *Competition, Exercise, Provocation and Verbal Comments: Influences on Attributions and Aggressions*. Thesis (M.S.) Pennsylvania State University, 1981
- Moore, Marvin. *How to Handle Competition*. Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing Association, 1978
- Muth, Vesta. *Competition vs Cooperation*. Thesis (M.A.) Goddard College, Plain Field, VT., 1966
- National Collegiate Athletic Association. *Promotion Manual*. NCAA Publishing, Mission, Kansas., 1985
- Sheffell, Vernon. *The Attitudes of Seventh-day Adventist toward Competitive sports in Seventh-day Adventist Academies*. Dissertation (Ed.D) Springfield College, June 1977
- Statements, Guidelines, and Other documents (a compilation)*. Mt. View, CA: Pacific Press, 1974
- Statements, Guidelines, and Other documents (a compilation)*. Mt. View, CA: Pacific Press, 1988
- White, E.G. *Education*. Mt. View, CA: Pacific Press, 1952.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Adventist Home*. Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing Association, 1965 pp 493-530
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Christ's Object Lessons*. Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1941
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Councils to Teachers, Parents, and Students*. Mt. View, CA: Pacific Press, 1943 pp 321-354
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Messages to Young People*. Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing Association, 1930 reprint 1974 p 38
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Recreation: an appeal to students and teachers in our schools and employees in our sanitariums*. Mt. View, CA: Pacific Press 191?
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Review and Herald*. (July 20, 1972)
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Review and Herald*. Vol. 58, No. 28 (1881)
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Selected Messages Book 1*. Mt. View, CA: Pacific Press, 1954.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Testimonies for the Church*. Vol. 1, Mt. View, CA: Pacific Press, 1855-1909
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Ministry of Healing*. Mt. View, CA: Pacific Press, 1942.