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## WWJS What Would Jesus Sell (For Sports)

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE  
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In a recent interview Deion Sanders, the guru of Jesus jocks, said that he doesn't see how he could have sports in his life without religion. "They go together like peanut butter and jelly."

No Aquinas, he!

If you find Deion's imagery a bit thin in theological clout, then you might find the merchandise available at Catholic Supply of St. Louis a bit more to your liking. Here you will find an array of items mixing sport and religion in the most banal, yet somehow aggressively tasteless, fashion. It seems that when it comes to the merchandising of religious kitsch, there is no bottom.

Let us explore the abyss.

At the top of the line are the "Jesus Sports Statues," six-inch high figurines showing the Son of God in sports action with children. For twenty dollars you can be the first at your church to own one of these inspirational collectibles. Currently these little gems are available for six sports, each seemingly bent on outdoing the other in sheer wackiness.

The baseball motif shows Jesus helping a young boy with his swing. The gospel song, "Jesus at the Home Plate" comes to mind. Soccer Jesus is in a running pose with the ball on his toe moving it forward on two other boys. Robes and sandals seem to be no problem for this Pele divinity.

More troubling are the hockey and football figurines. In the hockey statuette Jesus is the third man in on a face-off. This not only pushes the rulebook, but is an aesthetic violation. Three sticks in a face-off is very messy. They need to take this one back to the drawing board. I would suggest going with Jesus dropping the puck for the face-off. The symbolism there would be richer and the figurine visually more appealing.

The football figure is predictable with Christ handing off to a young boy. Take the ball and run with it Johnny! What is surprising and troubling is that another boy is tackling Jesus. Doesn't he know who this is? He could burn in hell for this impudence. This is not the kind of message one wants to convey

in a religious context. The basketball and track figurines are in the same tacky mold.

Moving on to other items, I was surprised to learn that St. Sebastian is the patron saint of athletes. Naturally this means there is a St. Sebastian Medal, Sterling Silver, on a 24 inch "endless chain." I would prefer to think of it as an eternal chain. Sainly athletic support is available for just \$24.95 and each medal comes in an attractive gift box.

If the St. Sebastian medal is too generic, then try the St. Christopher "sport" medals, available for twelve gender specific sports at a cost of \$19.95. Those who thought that St. Christopher had been purged, rejoice! He is back, although perhaps not on your dashboard. The gender differences by sport and the activities included in the category of sport are quite interesting.

The other kind of medal that I find attractive and one that did not exist when I was coming of age in Catholic schools, is the Angel Pin. These little gems, 1 inch in size, available only by the dozen in one style for \$59.40, are two-tone pewter and 24K gold and each angel is holding a piece of equipment from the specified sport. It would appear that this is an attempt to resurrect the theology of guardian angels, a concept that was very much a part of my Catholic education, but one that never seemed to help me at exam time.

There is a vast range of other sport items with religious themes. Sports prints in 9 x 11 walnut frames at \$19.95, encourage persistence and effort on the field. "Jesus on the Soccer Field" captures "the delight felt by Christ when we strive to do our best." Teamwork and goal setting are other values that are demonstrated. "Batting for Christ" encourages persistence and "you don't have to be a Little League star to appreciate the message."

The gem of the golf items is the "Stay the Course Golf Cap," also available as a towel. The sales pitch says it all: "On the links, in the clubhouse or at home you can give your Christian witness and stay on course for the Lord." Bag of tees included. It doesn't get much better than this.

I don't want to offend anyone here but it seems to me that all of this mixing of sport and religion in merchandise, coming from a Catholic Supply firm, is evidence of the corruption of American Catholicism by the purveyors of Positive Thinking

Protestantism. This poorly veiled platitudinal mix of Bruce Barton and Norman Vincent Peale has penetrated the Catholic mainstream. It is a derivative of what Jonathan Edwards called "Smiling Christianity," a form of comfortable theology available on tap in New England for the new burgeoning merchant class of the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. It has now arrived for the new century in all of its American merchandising glory and splendor.

Pass the peanut butter and jelly!

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

NOTE: A LONGER ILLUSTRATED VERSION OF THIS ARTICLE WITH LINKS IS AVAILABLE

AT [www.PopPolitics.com](http://www.PopPolitics.com) and I would encourage you to visit that site.

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