

## **ONLY THE PLAYERS GET PAID**

If you have ever gone to a college or professional basketball or football game where the arena or stadium is sold out, you know the spectators far outnumber the players. At the largest college football stadium, there will be only 22 players on the field while over 100,000 people will be cheering in the stands; that's about one player for every 4500 spectators. At the largest basketball venues [pro or college level] you will have 10 players on the court and about 20,000 fans in the stands; that's about one player for every 2000 spectators. Some of those spectators give reason to be called "fans" [short for fanatics], coming to the arena in their team's colors and some going so far as painting their bodies and wearing some outlandish clothing to show their support. If the game is a good one, those spectators will be cheering wildly for their team, rejoicing when their team scores and even more when they win, and booing the opposition mercilessly.

If you have ever been to a playoff game, you have seen for yourself that the level of intensity on the court or field of play is greatly increased and the excitement in the stands increases proportionally. The players get pumped up because they know the championship is on the line and every play counts. The spectators get pumped up because they want their team to go all the way and they want something to cheer about for at least a year. They want to be able to share in the joy and excitement of winning that championship, and they will buy the shirts and caps that proclaim that championship, should it ever come.

But only the players get paid.

Oh, you can buy team jerseys to look like a professional player and you can bulk up to look like a professional player and you can even go out and accessorize your automobile to look like the cars of the stars, but that won't get you on the court or on the field and you aren't the one who is actually playing for the championship. At best, you sit at a courtside seat or get to stand on the 50-yard line and all you do is watch. Spectators are just that: spectators. A spectator is one who watches a spectacle. They are not players and, in fact, they have to pay just to watch!

Only the players get paid.

When the championship game is played and the players put forth their best effort of the year and defeat the opponent, they can claim victory and they get to call themselves "Champions" — and everyone else recognizes that title, too. [Even the ones who lost.] The members of the winning teams get paid the guaranteed money for playing and winning, they will be honored in their home town and maybe at the White House, and after a few weeks or months, a "Championship" ring will be delivered to them as a reward for their efforts and as a lifetime reminder of what they had accomplished. Those rings are highly valued by those who earn them, and they are not handed out to just anyone and everyone. Not even the most loyal fan.

Only the players who win get the ring.

The apostle Paul was aware of the influence of athletics on society and occasionally used athletic analogies to make a point about our spiritual efforts — points that are still important today for all who seek the spiritual reward. And his point in using these analogies is clear: only the players get paid.

Paul wrote to the Corinthian brethren, “Do you not know that in a race all the runners compete, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified” (1 Corinthians 9:24-27). Note well that Paul exhorted them to run the spiritual race in such a way as they might obtain the prize — eternal life. Those who are running the race have the opportunity to win, but being in the race does not guarantee victory. Using himself as an example, he said he disciplined his body to keep its desires under control lest he also be disqualified [thrown out and unable to compete for the prize]. Never forget that simply being in the spiritual race is not enough; we must run to win! Half-hearted efforts will not be rewarded and not everyone gets ribbons!

Only the runners get the wreath.

If you have ever seen a long-distance run such as the Boston Marathon or the Olympic marathon, you have probably seen the streets or paths of the course lined with spectators, especially towards the end of the course. People cheer wildly when their favorite runner passes by and some have been known to jump out onto the course to cheer the runner. Sometimes they end up interfering with the race itself! In the modern Olympic competition, nations root for their team member and when they see their runner break the tape, pandemonium breaks loose and his home country's flags are waved madly to show support and joy for "us" winning the race.

But only the runner gets the medal.

As much as his countrymen and supporters relish his victory, the runner who finished and won the race is the only one who gets the medal. The spectators who cheered him along the way or gave him water or waved the flags or watched every mile on television do not get the medal. As much effort as they put into watching, that is all they did — watch. Though some obviously put more effort and energy into their 'watching', they still were mere spectators.

In the spiritual race, are you a participant or a mere spectator? Be honest. And please don't confuse your wild cheering and vocal support for the real participants with actual participation. Even psychologists recognize a habit of some rabid fans who mentally put themselves in the place of actual team members and whose minds are so stimulated by wins or losses that their mental state mimics the residual effects of actual physical experiences. In other words, they are so wrapped up in the event and the players, they convince themselves they actually had a part in

the victory or in the loss and they rejoice as if they had shot the winning basket or, in losses, as if they were the one who missed the potential game-winner.

In the local church where you work and worship, are you a participant, or are you sitting on the sidelines? Stop for a moment and think about all the particular works that are being done: Are you an active participant or are you merely cheering on those who are doing the work? Do you teach? Do you pray when prayers are needed? Do you try to talk to your neighbors? Do you edify your brethren? Do you have brethren in your home to get to know them better? Do you sing in spirit and in truth? What are you doing to strengthen this congregation?

If you said, "I give [financial support] regularly," good for you. But if that is supposed to be a substitute for doing the work, you are sadly mistaken about the purpose of giving. We give of our financial means because we should support those who are doing the work, but that does not absolve us of our responsibilities to do the work of the Lord and to be abounding in it (I Corinthians 15:58). If I prayed, that doesn't mean I don't have to sing; if I give it doesn't mean I don't have to teach my neighbor. If you think that is "the preacher's job" then you may have a spectator's attitude.

When we stand before God and Christ in the final Judgment, each one will be judged "for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil" (II Corinthians 5:10). Note that he will be judged for what he has done — not for what he has cheered about and vocally supported. If he has merely watched others do the work, he will be judged for having done nothing. So what are we doing?

Don't get me wrong; we need to support one another (cf. I Corinthians 12:26; Romans 12:15), but remember this: Only the participants will receive the reward.

Article by Steven Harper