

Sport

Having God in a squad is no longer mocked

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‘We don’t do God,’ Alastair Campbell famously interjected when Tony Blair, as prime minister, was once asked about his faith. English football has never really done God either.

Discretion, rather than evangelism, is the usual way for many English players or coaches who have lacked the confidence of, say, their Brazilian team-mates to openly wear their faith on their T-shirts, or just talk about religion.

One leading British manager once started telling me about how Christianity underpinned his work and his life (no, it was not Glenn Hoddle) but then asked me to wipe it from the record. “Too much bother,” he said.

That was a few years ago but I wonder if he would feel the same nervousness now, especially after chatting to prominent members of the Christians in Sport (CIS) network. They are not, they hasten to add, on a proselytising mission but feel, in Mental Health Awareness Week in particular, that they should be part of that necessary discussion.

If openness is being encouraged about how we face life’s challenges, why not be frank about how religion is where some find their support?

CIS has been going for 40 years but, according to Graham Daniels, a former player and now director of Cambridge United who is also general director of CIS, it has never been busier than in this time of Covid-19. That is another reason the organisation feels robust about talking when more than 500 elite athletes and coaches from football to netball, tennis to athletics, are regular members of group discussions.

“To say that this has no place in professional sport is a barbarian way to think,” Daniels says. “It is not a wise way to think because it does not take into account the reality for thousands of sportspeople, and that is why I am delighted the culture has changed.”

When Daniels found his faith as a young footballer at Cambridge in the 1980s, it was a lonely place to be as a Christian. “If in football 30 years ago you did not fit the macho, aggressive, drinking, womanising, in-your-face, one-of-the-boys, gaffer-the-big-authority-figure... If you in any way did not fit with that caricature or play up to it, your career was at risk, as simple as that,” he says.

“I could barely find anyone who wanted to talk about a different perspective on life across the profession. Here I am now in this conversation.”

Discretion is guaranteed for those who want it. A high profile can be one of the challenges. “The more famous you are, the harder it is to be involved in a local church,” Daniels says. “So much of our work is supporting people who cannot get usual access on a Sunday morning.”

That support comes in many



Klopp finds religion liberating and says his “lust for life” derives from his faith

different forms. It is usually in small gatherings but, in a time of coronavirus, the switch online to Zoom has actually opened up more communication whether it is among 20 or 30 coaches, or athletes from the different “tour sports” such as golf and tennis.

Meetings may be about a particular theme — trust or isolation — and can involve mentoring or peer support, bible discussions and prayers. At a time of anxiety for many, and with churches closed, connection feels vital.

Underpinning it all, Daniels says, is encouraging self-acceptance in an industry that can bring intolerable expectations, harsh judgments, brutal short-termism and fear of being dropped or dismissed. Identities get wrapped up in 90 minutes. Faith is the way that some find equilibrium and comfort.

“Of course you are judged on performance,” Daniels says. “It’s a performance industry, but where people feel their belief in God may give them security is that their existence is not conditional on their performance. That’s the bedrock phenomenon here. Someone needs to

believe in you, whether you win or lose. If you don’t get unconditional love, there is no prospect that you can develop a vision of your own life that transcends your performance as an athlete. And your athlete days will end.”

Michael Johnson, who represented Birmingham City in defence more than 250 times from 1995 to 2003 and now helps to coach England Under-21, is one of the CIS regulars. He echoes the view that his faith was of particular importance when his playing career concluded in 2009.

“You can feel empty, you can feel you have lost your identity,” he says. “That is why my Christianity was so important when I retired. I felt loved not for playing in front of thousands of people but just in my living room on my own at home.”

Darren Moore, the former West Bromwich Albion manager now in charge of Doncaster Rovers, is another who says that religion has helped him to deal with the vicissitudes of football.

“Particularly as men we can bottle a lot of stuff up,” he says. “It’s so good to know there are people that you can share the pain and frustration with,

and give you some sort of guidance. Get a job, lose a job, you know that CIS is always there to turn to.”

Nathan Jones has never hidden his Christianity, even though as a player at Brighton & Hove Albion and Yeovil Town, he would be teased as the “bible-basher” or the “God squad”. He has religious tattoos proudly daubed across his body; Jesus on one shoulder; a cross, angel and part of Michelangelo’s paintings from the Sistine Chapel on his back.

A rising star in management at Luton Town, it all got difficult at Stoke City, where he was sacked in November. “I have had to battle with the fact that it did not go as I anticipated,” he says. “I’ve had to look for a lot of answers, from God and within myself.”

One bad run has not disturbed his conviction that he is being guided by a higher force and he believes that his “Christianity enables me to be honest, have an equilibrium and be a manager they might not like, but respect”.

Johnson agrees. “It informs my coaching absolutely, because I am operating from a value system,” he says. “I think it encourages me to be more empathetic, to be more understanding, trying to get to the core of someone’s being.”

All add that they never evangelise at work, explaining their beliefs only if asked, but it is interesting to note what Jürgen Klopp once told a German newspaper. “To be a believer, but not to want to talk about it — I do not know how it would work,” the Liverpool manager said.

Klopp has been very open about the impact of his upbringing in a Lutheran home and how his “lust for life” derives from his faith. It also gives him a sense of security. “There is nothing so important to me that I cannot bear to lose it, and that is why I find I have no reason to fear,” Klopp says.

For Klopp, religion is liberating, so we can take it that he would have no fear of the stifling conformity of English football which has, in the past, made many feel that to “do God” is to risk being isolated or stereotyped.

“Sometimes it’s not even a religious conversation or a sport conversation when they get together,” Daniels says. “It’s just people from one industry exploring common ground.”

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