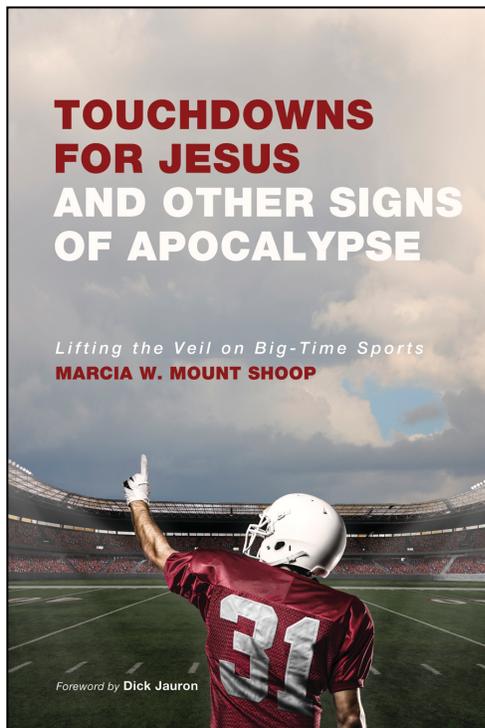


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Practicing Redemption: Exorcising Demons and Reimagining Big-Time Sports



Why do sports matter so much to so many people? And why should we care? Far from being a distraction or a trivial pastime, sports tell us deep truths about ourselves. Big-time sports are a particularly potent mirror for humanity—reflecting both our promising possibilities and our demonic distortions. Theologian (and football coach’s wife) Marcia Mount Shoop invites you to take a closer look at the hold that sports have on us. *Touchdowns for Jesus and Other Signs of Apocalypse* takes you beneath the veil in some of the most challenging issues in sports today: fanaticism, sexism, racism, and abuse of power. And beneath the lifted veil you also encounter wisdom about how we can find our way back to what is most life-giving about sports. If you love sports, or if you just wonder why others do, *Touchdowns for Jesus* will give you a whole new way to view the games people play.

Marcia writes with the passion of a sport’s insider combined with the incisiveness of an academically trained theologian and ethicist. The mix of personal experience and constructive perspective mean this book is worth reading for anyone concerned about, in love with, critical of, or involved in sports at any level. *Touchdowns for Jesus* is recommended reading for thoughtful individuals and for the classroom.

The Rev. Marcia W. Mount Shoop, PhD, is the author of *Let the Bones Dance: Embodiment and the Body of Christ* (2010) and a blogger on faith, family, and football at www.marciamountshoop.com. She and her husband, Coach John Shoop, have been in the world of big-time sports for over twenty years.

Touchdowns for Jesus and Other Signs of Apocalypse
978620329191 / paper / available July 2014 / list price \$17.00

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An Imprint of WIPF and STOCK Publishers

Praise for *Touchdowns for Jesus*

“Mount Shoops’s new book, *Touchdowns for Jesus and Other Signs of Apocalypse*, will become a classic for everyone, from fans to scholars, looking to frame collegiate sports in a way that offers tangible ideas and inspiration for refashioning this billion dollar industry so that it insures student-athletes are accepted, nurtured, and prepared for the championship we call life.”

—Emmett Gill, Assistant Professor of Social Work, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, NC

“With eloquent intensity, Marcia W. Mount Shoop challenges all we think we know about the college and professional sports culture that has uniquely enveloped the last two decades of her life as a coach’s wife, mother, and minister. As Shoop writes, ‘Football provides us with an apocalypse worth our gaze,’ and her personal tales—from shouting at hecklers at Soldier Field to getting kicked out of a wives’ Bible study—enrich the wisdom of her words. . . . By the end, it’s easy to feel better for having examined Shoop’s powerful language that creates a clearer understanding of the redemptive powers of sport.”

—David Haugh, Chicago Tribune sports columnist, Chicago, IL

“Throw out the playbook. This is not a conventional play—and certainly not a conventional book about big time sports and theology. Marcia has written an incredibly thoughtful and insightful perspective for all of us rabid sports fans to consider. Reading this book will help all of us in examining our faith and how it plays out in our day to day devotion to big-time sports in our society.”

—Robert Orr, former North Carolina Supreme Court Justice, NC

“Reverend Marcia Shoop is a powerful woman and a great writer. Her intelligence, education, and compassion provide her rare insights into sports. She has been close enough to this insane world to know how it works, but removed enough to clearly and honestly discuss what’s right and wrong about the games we watch and the machines that drive them.”

—Bomani Jones, ESPN Commentator, Miami, FL

“Mount Shoop combines her knowledge as a feminist theologian and ordained minister with her years of experience as a football coach’s wife to navigate the reader through a spiritual journey into the world of big time sports. Shaped by her religiously informed feminist commitment to social justice, Mount Shoop offers revelations on sport’s potential for redemption and what we as a society can do to create a more equitable world for athletes, coaches, fans, and communities. A must read for anyone concerned with the sexism, racism, and institutional power and abuse that plagues big-time sports in the United States.”

—Cheryl Cooky, Associate Professor of Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN

“Regardless of the regularity of sport scandals, we as an American society continue to ‘repeat and repent’ our transgressions in this irresistible industry. With a spiritual lens and insider’s perspective, Shoop provides an intellectual and passionate framework to dissect our involvement and passion for sport competition. A far notion from a ‘Hail Mary’—*Touchdowns for Jesus* scores with ease as a must read for critical conversations that foster solutions to the numerous challenges of sport.”

—Deborah L. Stroman, Professor of Sport Science, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC

What is the book about?

This book explores the world of big-time sports from the perspective of an insider who applies a theological/ethical framework to the most profound challenges that face us. The abiding question is really why do people care so much about sports and what we can learn about ourselves when we take a closer look at that reality. When we allow big-time sports to surface both hard truths and stunning possibilities what do we learn about who we are and who we can be.

Why did you write this book?

It was not an easy decision, but I definitely felt called to write it. I wrote it because I love sports, I wrote it because sports have helped to frame almost my entire life, and I wrote it because I am deeply troubled by some of the forces at work in sports today. I wrote it because I believe in sports' redemptive capacity, and I wrote it because I cannot turn a blind eye to the harmful distortions that have become so prevalent in sports today.

Does this book deal with what is happening with college revenue sports today?

Yes, very much so. My family's experience in college revenue sports informs a lot of my perspective on things like the NCAA and the academic v. athletics debate. I very much want the conversation that is currently happening around college-revenue sports to be taken to a deeper and wider place—right now it is missing some key voices and the conversation is failing to ask some of the most pressing questions.

Was it challenging to write a book about the male-dominated world of big-time sports as a woman?

Writing it was not hard. Being welcomed into the conversation about big-time sports as a woman is what is hard.

How did you choose to focus on the issues you focus on: fanaticism, sexism, racism, higher education, and religion in sports?

These are all layers of sports that have had a profound impact on my life. I write from personal experience and from a deep conviction that these areas are the places where we need to collectively spend our time exploring. All of these spaces of inquiry and experience hold some life-giving wisdom for us. And I believe that all of them have been dealt with in the most vocal and public conversations about sports in ways that miss that wisdom. These issues are dealt with on the surface—I want to get underneath and surface some of the root issues. Otherwise the conversations become trivial and repetitive and the problems never get solved.

Does this book call for an end to big-time sports as we know them today?

No. This book calls for a richer conversation about big-time sports as we know them today. No matter how you cut it, big-time sports are being ushered toward change. Players' rights, concussion rates, money, and many other issues are creating pressure for change. Change will occur—my concern is that if we are not asking the kinds of questions that we truly need to ask ourselves, and that many of the sports we love will be casualties of a trivialized discernment process.

What do you hope to accomplish with this book?

I hope to enrich the conversation, not just with my voice, but with the voices of others who have not been heard. I hope that the conversation can grow and become more representative of the true stakeholders in the world of sports.

Who would be interested in this book?

Anyone who loves sports, anyone who loathes sports, anyone who thinks things should change, anyone who is afraid things will change. I think some of the categories I use will be particularly compelling for people of faith, but I don't think it will only connect with people of faith. In many ways, it is social commentary. I simply describe things through the lenses that have helped shape me, and theology, ethics, and the life of a coach's wife are three of those lenses.

So, why do people care so much about sports?

In a nutshell, people care so much about sports because sports create space for us to practice redemption, grit, relationship, community, vitality—all the skills, gifts, and challenges of being human. For more of an answer, read the book!

An Excerpt from *Touchdowns for Jesus and Other Signs of Apocalypse*

...[S]ports can show us what is truest about us— and such a revelation of our nature, our distortion, and our promise is nothing short of apocalyptic.

As a theologian, this is where I cannot help but fix my gaze—behind the veil of human distortion, squinting and straining to catch a glimpse of something divine. Theology searches for God's fingerprints in human life, knowing that we can never satisfy this hunger we have for certainty, for answers to life's deepest questions.

Sports may seem trivial to some, but when taken in total they capture our imagination and elicit our deepest emotional outpourings much more than any religion does. Thanking Jesus for touchdowns as well as our deepest longing for our team to succeed are ripe for theological inquiry. Indeed these deeply complicated dynamics of human life in our American culture (and beyond) are apocalyptic—truth-bearing and truth-telling. But theology is not simply about finding answers. Theology is practicing ways to see the threads of redemption in life; theology is a redemptive practice.

As it stands in our contemporary context, sports and our deepest beliefs are not always integrated in a life-giving way. The connection between the divine and sport can seem to cluster as polar opposites—it's either touchdowns for Jesus or God has nothing to do with sports at all. And the question of where or whether God fits into sports rarely explores the meatier issues that are tangled up in this object of so much human energy—like gender, race, and fanaticism. Not only do sports offer a chance to explore divine power and our human condition, but they also hold a mirror up to us about our most tenacious and dangerous distortions.

This theological project is a search for the redemptive capacity of sports by way of naming its demons. Indeed when we particularly begin to excavate what is beneath the surface of the spectacle of big-time sports, we can see some of humanity's most robust demons exercising their power. Because sports offer such access to these distortions it also provides us with a chance to call them out and take a closer look. Sports give us a chance to not just blindly exercise these demons, but to exorcise them. This exorcism's purpose is redemption. Unveiling, naming, and exorcising the demonic distortions that big-time sports embody creates an opportunity to practice new habits, new ways of engaging in the communities that sports help to form. And these new practices have the capacity to be life-enhancing, expansive, and even healing to the larger world.

This unveiling may show us more about what is possible in our collective lives together. This exploration may help us to see divine activity in a new way. Is there a mirror held up to us from sports that can help us be who we were created to be in a way that truly elicits our better angels? This question presses on me as a theologian with pronounced intensity because of the unique situation in which I live. I am a theologian and an ordained Presbyterian minister and I am married to a professional football coach. I am also a former competitive athlete. My husband has been in coaching for most of the years of our relationship. He spent twelve seasons (the first twelve years of our marriage) coaching in the National Football League (NFL). He has been one of the youngest offensive coordinators ever to call a game in the NFL. He has also coached at a number of universities. Our family has moved from Tennessee, to North Carolina, to Chicago, to

Tampa, to Oakland, back to North Carolina again, and now to West Lafayette, Indiana, for this vocation of his. In the midst of these places we've called home I have been ordained to the ministry, completed a PhD in Religious Studies, and served different churches in various capacities. Our marriage seems peculiar to many people. And while our marriage makes sense to the two of us, we have yet to meet another theologian married to a football coach.

...And with a NCAA football investigation at the University of North Carolina (UNC) our lives took another turn as well. That experience in particular deeply informs the work of this book and, in some cases, the different direction that it has taken from when the idea for writing it was first born. Our experience at UNC lifted the veil on tenacious layers of many of the issues I had already planned to explore in this book. The apocalypse, however, in some cases has meant seeing some things anew in ways that deeply grieve us. Indeed, in many ways, our experience at UNC has changed how we locate ourselves in the world of sports. What happened there makes this work all the more difficult to do and, at the same time, impossible not to do.