

God or basketball?

Which one has a greater hold on my heart? Let's take a look.

by [Jonathan Tran](#) in the [April 2024](#) issue



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I've wondered which I love more, God or basketball. I know, if you need to ask you already know. Still, if they matched up one-on-one, who would win?

Those concerned about a Christian theologian asking such questions—instead of sticking to mysteries like the problem of evil—might find some comfort knowing that

while I teach at a Christian university, it's also a basketball school, with multiple national championships and a president who's quite the baller herself. They too would like to see this play out.

So first, how long have I played basketball versus how long have I, to quote Augustine, "loved Thee, Beauty ancient and new"? (Just to be clear, Augustine was talking about God, not basketball, though mostly because basketball hadn't yet been invented; more on this later.) I started playing basketball about four decades ago. I became a Christian three decades ago. Basketball wins by a decade. First points go to basketball.

Next, for four decades I've played basketball about three times a week, typically for two hours. That's 12,480 hours of basketball, or 520 days of my life. As much as that is, I've logged far more hours for God, not only in church, small group, prayer, and stuff like that, but I'm also a theologian and a former pastor; Christianity is my job. God gets the bucket, and one.

But what about my identity? Am I first and foremost a Christian or a baller? Do I see myself as a professor who plays basketball or a baller whose job gives him free access to college gyms? Alas, basketball doesn't pay the bills, so this one goes to God.

Which has cost me more, following Jesus or playing basketball? I recently had surgery to repair a series of broken noses and deviated septa. It was awful. I've torn both shoulders, mangled all my fingers, gotten every manner of bruise, cramp, cut, contusion, concussion, and injury. All from basketball. The game has simultaneously kept me healthy (physically and mentally) and nearly killed me. Following Jesus has cost me a few things, but let's be honest, while I talk a big game about the cost of discipleship, I live a pretty cushy life. Just look at my basketball shoe collection and you'll know God loses this one. Sorry, God, but as Ye know, this one goes to basketball.

Which one has produced more friendships? When I look back at my wedding party, my groomsmen were evenly divided between basketball friends and Christian friends. In the decades since, I've closed the gap by making almost all my friends basketball friends. It's dead even whether these friendships began on the court or in church, but I've mostly found my way to friends who happen to play basketball. One way to break the tie is to ask whether I would unfriend friends who stopped playing

basketball. Well, since this is going to be published and made public, I'd better say no and give this point to God. (But really the answer is yes; I'd drop them like a bad habit.)

Which has a greater hold on my heart? We examine our loves by examining our desires. A good Freudian way to measure desire is to ask which comes up more often in my dreams, as in subconsciously while I'm sleeping. This one definitely goes to basketball. To this day, the most recurring dream I have is returning to some place I used to live, texting friends to meet at some court, and waiting expectantly to get our game on. I almost never dream of lining up at the pearly gates awaiting entry into that place Augustine described as "the End that has no end." As I said, Augustine wasn't a hooper.

Ben Franklin famously said that beer is proof that God loves us and wants us to be happy. But Franklin, like Augustine, lived at a time before James Naismith invented basketball, and surely before Nike released the Air Jordan 3, the most iconic basketball shoes ever and part of my wardrobe of choice as a university administrator. If Franklin had basketball, I'm sure he would have replaced "beer" with "ball" and gotten struck by lightning not flying a kite but refusing to stop a game on account of a little weather.

Speaking of getting struck by lightning, which makes me happier, Jesus or basketball? No doubt, each come with challenges. Losing, giving up a big lead, getting scored on, shooting slumps, turnovers, fouling, bad defense, the Clippers—so much unhappiness. Still, though basketball lows are low, nothing compares to the lows wrought by the Lord of the Apocalypse. While I *feel* the basketball lows, I *know* life's lows are far worse. After all, when I get to heaven, I won't be asking God about why I lost some game. I'll be asking far more important questions. Like how a good God could allow UNC to beat Duke in the Final Four during Coach K's last game.

What's the score? Who's up? Do I love God or basketball more? As you can tell, it's hard to tell. God and basketball have been for me so interwoven for so long that it's hard to tell what's what. And for good reason. God does love us and does want us to be happy, and with things that actually make us happy.

As the other James said, every good and perfect gift comes from God, the "Father of lights" (James 1:17). There's nothing more perfect than a Steph Curry three-pointer, few things as good as Magic Johnson's no-look passes or Cheryl Miller chasing down a loose ball. The Christian in me and the basketballer in me see these things as one

and the same, the beauty of basketball as the beauty of God, which for me has meant 12,480 hours being trained to see every good and perfect thing as coming down from the Father of lights. Or maybe James meant “the Father of flight.”