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Pope Sets Up Vatican Sports Department

Tuesday, August 03, 2004
Associated Press

VATICAN CITY — He made saves as a soccer goalkeeper in his high school years in Poland, skied and kayaked in Europe and swam laps in the papal pool. Now Pope John Paul II ([search](#)) has set up a sports department to give the Vatican a kind of new playing field in its drive to spread Christian values around the world.

PHOTOS



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The **Vatican** ([search](#)) announced the initiative Tuesday, pointing to the millions of people who will follow the Olympics in Athens this month as proof of the important role sports plays in today's world.

"The Holy Father has always been interested in sports, and as a means of evangelization and a great way to form youth," said the Rev. Kevin Lixey, an American priest involved in establishing the department in the **Pontifical Council for Lay People** ([search](#)).

With doping scandals and fan violence marring cycling, soccer and other sports, the pope's initiative is aimed in part at countering negative images, said Lixey, a member of the Legionaries of Christ, a conservative religious institute with headquarters in Rome.

There is a need to "let people know that there are sportsmen who are also virtuous," Lixey said in a telephone interview.

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While the 84-year-old pope has given Roman Catholics a record number of saints as fresh role models, the sports initiative will see the Vatican promoting what it calls "testimony of Christian life" from the sporting world.

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"The church, which has always shown particular attention to various and important sectors of human coexistence, is called upon without doubt to pay attention to sports, which certainly can be considered one of the nerve centers of contemporary culture and one of the frontiers for new evangelization," the Vatican said.

However, the Vatican said that "tendencies that have distanced more and more the practice of various disciplines from the original ideals of sports pose with urgency the need to appeal to fundamental values in this field."

The Vatican didn't say what disturbed it, but stadium violence, athletes' failing doping tests and game-fixing inquiries have grabbed many sports headlines recently.

John Paul wants to make "the Holy See's solicitude felt in the world of sports," the Vatican said.

The pontiff has given the weeks-old department its marching orders. Among the directives, the Vatican said, is fostering a "sports culture which promotes a vision of sports activity as a means of integral personal growth and as an instrument in the service of peace and brotherhood among peoples."

Lixey said the Church and Sports department was in its fledgling stages, but he indicated it would have a broad sweep, ranging from contacts with institutions like the international soccer federation and Olympic committees to local parishes.

Many Catholic schools and parish worldwide long have had teams and playing fields for young faithful, but the pope's initiative is aimed at imbuing such efforts with a more formal purpose, Lixey indicated.

Sports have played a prominent part in many of the public activities of the pope, who early in his papacy was dubbed "God's athlete" in the media. Two summers ago, he gave his blessing to Real Madrid, the Spanish soccer powerhouse, when the players paid a call on the papal vacation residence in Castel Gandolfo.

During the church's Holy Year in 2000 to mark the new millennium, John Paul celebrated Mass in Rome's Olympic Stadium for the world of sports and presided over an unprecedented all-star soccer game.

Those who thought Krakow's bishop, Karol Wojtyla, might renounce athletic passions when he was elected pope in 1978 were wrong. Until hip and knee problems that developed in the last decade and the onset of Parkinson's disease slowed him down, John Paul would set out on long mountain excursions during summer vacations in the Alps. In his first years as pope,



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he occasionally slipped away from the Vatican to ski in the Appennines of central Italy.

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