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Italy's Jannik Sinner, left, shares a light moment with Pope Leo XIV on the occasion of their meeting at the Vatican, Wednesday, May 14, 2025. (Vatican Media via AP, File)

Nicole Winfield

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Pope Leo XIV, an avid tennis player and sports fan, marked the start of the Winter Games Feb. 6 by extolling the positive values of sport and fair play while warning that the pursuit of profits and performance risked corrupting sport entirely.

In a message titled "Life in Abundance" issued on the same day as the Milan Cortina opening ceremony, Leo traced the history of Christian philosophers and popes who had identified sports and leisure activity as beneficial for both physical and spiritual development.

And he repeated his call for world leaders to respect the ancient tradition of an Olympic truce.

But drawing on his own experience as an athlete, Leo delved into a nuanced exploration of the value of sports and the risk when the "dictatorship of performance" posed by doping, match-fixing and other forms of corruption win out over fair play.

"Such dishonesty not only corrupts sporting activities themselves, but also demoralizes the general public and undermines the positive contribution of sport to society as a whole," he warned.

He called for sport to be accessible, to both poor people and women especially, and for fans to refrain from turning sport into a fanatical religion. Athletes, too, he said, must refrain from narcissism and becoming obsessed with their image and success.

"The cult of image and performance, amplified by media and digital platforms, risks fragmenting the person, separating body from mind and spirit," he warned.

True sport, he said, calls for a "shared ethical accord" between competitors, where the rules of the game are accepted and the integrity of the contest is respected.

"Accepting the limits of one's body, the limits of time and fatigue, and respecting the established rules means recognizing that success comes from discipline, perseverance and loyalty," he said.

A sporty pope

Popes have a long history of engaging the sporting world to promote values of peace, solidarity and friendship, with the Olympics offering them regular opportunities to recall the ancient tradition of an Olympic truce.

On Sunday, Leo called for an Olympic truce to accompany the Games, urging especially world leaders to take the opportunity of the Games to "make concrete gestures of detente and dialogue."

Leo, 70, is famously sporty: He religiously plays tennis and swims at his country house where he escapes from Monday to Tuesday each week, and is a longtime fan of the Chicago White Sox baseball team.

Before becoming pope, then-Cardinal Robert Prevost would also work out at the Vatican-area Omega gym two to three times a week, with hourlong sessions focusing especially on posture and cardiovascular health, according to his personal trainer at the time. Prevost's workouts, described as suitable for a man in his 50s, would last up to an hour and focus especially on the treadmill and exercise bike, trainer Valerio Masella told The Associated Press last year.

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When Leo was elected, the Italian Open was underway and one of Leo's first audiences was with former No. 1 tennis player Jannik Sinner of Italy, who gave him a racket.

Leo drew on his experience as a tennis player in his message, noting the cultural and spiritual benefits of the so-called "flow experience," of being challenged beyond one's level, that both fans and players alike can experience in a prolonged tennis rally.

"The reason this is one of the most enjoyable parts of a match is that each player pushes the other to the limit of his or her skill level," Leo wrote. "The experience is exhilarating, and the two players challenge each other to improve; this is as true for two ten-year-olds as it is for two professional champions."

Perhaps also drawing on his personal experience, Leo urged athletes to always remember values of sportsmanship and graciousness in both victory and defeat. Playing fair, he said, brings people together and values the journey as well as the

end result.

"It teaches us that we can strive for the highest level without denying our own fragility; that we can win without humiliating others; and that we can lose without being defeated as individuals," he wrote.

A history of popes engaged in sport

Leo's athleticism and attention to the spiritual and social values of sport is nothing new.

St. John Paul II, who was elected pope at the age of 58, was an avid skier and mountain trekker.

Pope Benedict XVI preferred solitary walks in the mountains. Pope Francis wasn't athletic at all — he was known as "hard foot" as a child because of his poor soccer skills — but he was a lifelong fan and member of the Argentine soccer club San Lorenzo.

Francis also spoke out frequently about the positive values of teamwork and camaraderie in sport, especially for young people, and during his pontificate the Holy See began fielding track and cycling athletes in international competitions as team Atletica Vaticana.

Last year, on the occasion of the 2025 Holy Year, the Giro d'Italia passed through the Vatican.

Francis also warned of the downside of sport, especially at the professional level, often calling out doping, match-fixing and corruption that he said had tarnished people's trust in fair play.