



December, 2005
Volume 7, Issue 4

The Use of Prayer in Sport: Implications for Sport Psychology Consulting

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Introduction

The interaction between sport and religion has been a significant area of study for sport sociologists, who have recognized the importance of religion and spirituality in athletes' lives (Coakley, 2003; Hoffman, 1992; Stevenson, 1991). The existence of organizations such as Christians in Sport (CIS) in the United Kingdom and The Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) and The Center for Sport and Jewish Life in America, illustrates the significant number of religious athletes. Further evidence of the importance of this area of study is reflected in the establishment of an academic research Centre for The Study of Sport and Spirituality, which encourages "psychological, philosophical, theological . . . and sociological perspectives on the interface between sport and spirituality" (York St John College, 2005, p. 1). Nevertheless, prior to the 1970s and early 1980s, athletes rarely explicitly discussed their faith or observed religious rituals such as prayer during sports participation. Sport sociologists Nixon and Frey (1996) suggest this may be because other athletes and the media have in the past often ridiculed the religious athlete. These tensions have slowly subsided over the years and researchers, coaches and sport psychology consultants have begun to acknowledge the importance of religion and spirituality in sport and exercise research.

Due to the confusion in defining spirituality and religion and different types of religious prayer, it is important to offer working definitions at the outset. Religion has been defined as ". . . a system of beliefs in divine or superhuman power, and practices of worship or other rituals directed toward such a power" (Argyle & Beit-Hallahmi, 1975, p. 1). For example, Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Buddhism. Spirituality is a much broader concept that can be defined from a religious or humanist perspective, where personal meaning is derived from whatever people deem to be ultimate, and valued in and of itself (Helminiak, 1996). As the focus of this paper is religious prayer in sport, in particular Christian prayer, the term spirituality will be used in reference to religious

practice. Spirituality is often interpreted by religious believers as the *existential* aspect of their religious lives, for example, the practice of prayer throughout the day (outside a Church environment) and witness through the actions of every dimension of their lives, including sport (e.g., Romans 12: 1). Prayer is a central practice of all adherents of the three monotheistic religions, Christianity, Judaism and Islam. In short, prayer is the adherents' religious practice for communicating with God. There are several kinds of Christian prayer, for example, confession of sins, adoration of God, petition for needs, intercession for others and thanksgiving for benefits (Parrinder, 1998).

A recent review of literature has identified the relative neglect of spiritual and religious issues in the sport psychology literature and highlighted the need to further document its importance in athletes' and consultants' lives (Watson & Nesti, in press). This is surprising, as within our parent discipline, psychology, religious and spiritual issues have received significant attention (e.g., Miller & Delaney, 2005; Richards & Bergin, 1997, 1999). It has also been argued that the relatively new discipline of "positive psychology", which views the spiritual and religious as important dimensions of psychological health (e.g., Aspinwall & Staudinger, 2003; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), should be reconciled into sport psychology research and consultancy (Watson & Nesti, in press). This would allow for religious observances such as prayer to be more fully accepted and understood within our field.

Although there is a dearth of literature in sport psychology, previous empirical research exploring the religiosity of athletes (Storch, Storch, Kovacs, Okun, & Welsh, 2003; Storch, Storch, Kolsky, & Silvestri, 2001) and the cognitive orientations of ultra marathoners (Acevedo, Dzewaltowski, Gill, & Noble, 1992), has highlighted the importance of spirituality and religion in the lives of athletes. A number of applied sport psychologists have also emphasized the importance of the spiritual and religious dimension in consultancy work (Balague, 1999; Berger, Pargman, & Weinberg, 2002; Nesti, 2004; Ravizza, 2002; Salter, 1997). Watson and Nesti (in press) have suggested four key areas of research which need to be addressed if we are to move toward a more holistic understanding of sport psychology: (a) how spirituality and religion can be reconciled into current athlete-centered models (b) how spirituality and religion can be accommodated in sport psychology counseling (c) further study of the relationship between spirituality and religion and positive psychological states such as flow and peak experience, and (d) how spiritual and religious observances, such as Christian prayer and meditative techniques from eastern religions can be reconciled into mental skills training (MST).

The use of religious rituals in sport, especially Christian prayer, is one area of research that has begun to receive particular attention and will be the focus of this paper. A number of investigations have shown that the use of prayer by athletes before, during and after competition to be a common and valuable practice for enhancing performance and overall well-being (Czech & Burke, in press; Czech, Wrisberg, Fisher, Thompson, & Hayes, 2004; Park, 2000; Vernacchia, McGuire, Reardon, & Templin, 2000). This article will provide a brief review of existing literature on the use of prayer in sport, and will

provide recommendations for sport psychology consultancy work and future directions for research and scholarship.

Coakley (2003) has suggested six possible reasons athletes utilize religious prayer: prayer as a coping mechanism for uncertain stressful situations; to help live a morally sound life; to sanctify athletes' commitment to sport; to put sport into perspective; to establish a strong bond of attachment between teammates; and to maintain social control. The use of religious prayer to alleviate anxiety and stress in uncertain situations is prevalent among athletes, and is consequently an important topic for sport psychology research. Previous studies have identified the often traumatic and stressful impact of career-ending injuries (e.g., Udry, Gould, Bridges, & Beck, 1997), athletic retirement (e.g., Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2001) and career transitions, such as moving teams and changing participation level (Nesti, 2004). When athletes are confronted with this type of adversity and suffering, it is highly likely that athletes will ask existential and spiritual questions (Watson & Nesti, in press). It is argued that for Christian athletes, prayer will be an important source of strength and means of coping with anxiety. However, to date, there are only two studies that have explicitly examined the role of Christian prayer in sport psychology consulting (Czech et al., 2004; Czech & Burke, in press).

Czech et al. (2004) investigated the use of Christian prayer in sport adopting an existential-phenomenological method to collect and analyze data. Nine former Division I Christian athletes were interviewed using an interview guide comprising a series of open-ended questions. Findings showed that ". . . ritualistic activity has a powerful influence on athletes" and that they ". . . use prayer as a coping mechanism to alleviate stress" (p. 6). These findings are supported by the results of two other studies, which investigated coping strategies used by national Korean athletes (Park, 2000) and the determinants of professional and personal development in Olympic track and field athletes (Vernacchia et al., 2000). The results of both these investigations identified prayer as an important factor in coping with stress and anxiety, attaining peak performance and providing meaning to sports participation. A quote from a participant in Park's (2000) study encapsulates these findings:

I always prepared my game with prayer from the major games to the minor games. The content of my prayer to God is to help me do my best in practice time. I committed all things to God, without worry. . . . These prayers make me calmer and more secure and I forget the fear of losing. It resulted in good play (p. 73).

A significant body of empirical research in non-sports contexts supports these results and further illustrates the need and legitimacy of this area of study in sport psychology. Research investigations in health psychology (Duckro & Magaletta, 1994; Koenig, 1988; Koenig, McCullough, & Larson, 2001), medical science (Bernardi et al., 2001; Leibovici, 2001) and the psychology of religion (Finney & Malony, 1985; La Torre, 2004; McCullough, 1995), have demonstrated the significant positive and psychological and physiological effects of prayer, in particular the use of prayer in coping with stress and anxiety. Whilst further empirical investigation of the use and effect of prayer in sport and non-sport contexts is important, the current evidence merely confirms the ancient

teachings of the monotheistic religions (i.e., Judaism, Christianity and Islam). In times of adversity and uncertainty, believers have always used prayer for strength and as a means of coping with anxiety (Watson & Nesti, in press). In addition to prayer being used by athletes to cope with stress and anxiety in sport, there are other considerations for the sport psychology consultant when working with the religious athlete.

Athletes may utilize prayer and other religious observances to help provide special meaning to sports participation (Coakley, 2003; Shafranske, 1996). A study by Storch et al. (2001) explored the religiosity of 248 elite college athletes. Participants were administered the Duke Religion Index to assess organizational, non-organizational, and intrinsic dimensions of religion. One finding was that athletes' attendance at Church (which would include corporate and individual prayer) provided an opportunity to reflect on earlier accomplishments and future plans and thus to attach religious meaning to their sports participation. These results are supported by the study of Vernacchia et al. (2000) who found that ". . . an athlete's spiritual and religious beliefs [including the use of prayer] seemed to promote a deeper meaning to their athletic successes, failures, struggles, and disappointments" (p. 22). Similarly, Balague (1999), drawing on her consultancy work with elite rhythmic gymnasts and track and field athletes, suggests that personal meaning derived from religious beliefs of the athlete is closely linked to motivation. She concludes that if sport psychology interventions do not account for athletes' religious worldviews ". . . the likely outcome is not only that the intervention will not work, but that we lose the trust of the athletes by showing we do not understand something that is at the core of their identities and values" (p. 92). Many of the religious athletes identified in these studies frequently joined religious organizations such as Athletes in Action (AIA), which provides spiritual support for Christian athletes (e.g., Vernacchia et al., 2000).

Another possible reason athletes partake in prayer and religious observances is to put their sporting lives into perspective. Hoffman (1992) states that one way athletes can justify the self-focused, self-indulgent way of thinking that is so pervasive in competitive sports, is to define sports participation as an act of worship and an avenue of giving witness. This is supported by the research of Czech et al. (2004) who found that Christian athletes often use prayer in sport to "give glory to God" (p. 10). For example, one participant used the biblical verse Colossians 3:23: "whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, but for the Lord, not for man", as his motivation for sports participation. It is then apparent that when working with religious athletes, sport psychology consultants need to consider a number of important factors that may determine intervention design and approaches to counseling.

Implications for Sport Psychology Consultants

This review has identified that athletes utilized religious prayer in sport for three main reasons: coping with uncertainties and the concomitant anxiety, putting life and sport into perspective, and providing meaning to sports participation and competition (Czech & Burke, in press; Czech et al., 2004; Park, 2000; Vernacchia et al., 2000). Following the recommendations of Balague (1999), it is argued that when athletes have

curtailed religious practices due to busy sporting schedules or when suffering from anxiety and/or depression, sport psychology consultants should encourage athletes to renew religious practices. It is likely that this would assist the athlete in coping with sport and life issues in a more constructive manner, by helping them to be reflective and learn from the inevitable disappointments of competitive sport. In turn, this would most likely lead to character development and enhanced sporting performance. Another factor that is worthy of further investigation is the relationship between use of prayer and other religious observances and an athlete's levels of skill and attentional focus.

Past research has shown that the use of prayer in coping with uncertainties in sport is more significant for higher level athletes, for example, those playing in collegiate or elite sport (Buhrmann & Jarvis, 1981). Future research may examine the use and effectiveness of prayer in coping with uncertainties in sport in novice and low-level athletes. This would provide valuable guidance for coaches and sports leaders who are working with amateur athletes who hold religious or spiritual beliefs. Closely linked to this research, Eitzen, Sage, and Brown (1993) suggest that most athletes and coaches do not believe that religious prayer can make up for the failure to acquire necessary skills or employ correct situational strategies in sport. Womack (1992) theorized that one reason that athletes use religious rituals is because it helps them focus attention on the task at hand, thus aiding performance. Therefore, it is argued that in addition to prayer being used to alleviate anxiety, it may also assist in optimizing attentional focus (Nideffer, 1976) by blocking out excessive environmental stimuli, such as fan interruption and any distraction strategies of the opposition.

When dealing with religious athletes, another important consideration for the sport psychology consultant is the question of professional boundaries and levels of competence. If an athlete presents with serious difficulties in their religious life, consultants should refer the athlete to an appropriate professional from the religious community. Within professional sport this would most likely be the team's Chaplain or Minister, or in collegiate or amateur sport, either the college Chaplain or member of the community clergy. This emphasizes the need for sport psychology consultants to work closely with the religious professionals when appropriate, in order to provide a holistic service to athletes. For example, it is important that the sport psychology consultant is aware how prayer and other religious observances can be used as a useful adjunct to a conventional MST. However, consulting a religious professional may highlight how there are certain forms of intervention, such as positive self-talk, hypnosis, deep relaxation, and visualization that may not be appropriate for religious individuals, especially Christian athletes (Balague, 1999). For example, some forms of positive self-talk may conflict with the virtue of Christian humility.

Following this, sport psychology consultants need to be aware that religion and spirituality is a "very sensitive issue" (Burke, 1999, p. 232) and that on many occasions it is most appropriate to allow the athlete to raise the issue. However, Burke (1999) suggests that if a strong athlete-consultant relationship has developed, it may be appropriate for the consultant to initiate discussion of the meaningfulness of religion in an athlete's life. It is plausible that in working collaboratively, sport psychology

consultants and religious professionals could learn a great deal from one another in how best to support the religious athlete.

In conclusion, it is argued that understanding the role of religion and spirituality, especially prayer in an athlete's life, is a vital consideration for the sport psychology consultant. As acknowledged by others in the field (Balague, 1999; Nesti, 2004; Ravizza, 2002; Storch et al., 2001; Watson & Nesti, in press), this will significantly impact upon the strength of the athlete-consultant relationship, and in turn the potential for performance enhancement. Therefore, if an athlete holds religious convictions the sport psychology consultant should seek to understand and incorporate their athlete's beliefs into applied work.

Although this review has focused on the implications of athletes' use of prayer and religious observances for sport psychology consultancy, it may also provide useful information for coaches, managers and even parents who want to assist the religious athletes in their sporting lives.

Future Research

In light of the growing body of evidence in non-sports contexts that has shown the efficacy of prayer for enhancing psychological and physiological variables, future research of religious and spiritual issues in sport psychology is needed. Due to the embryonic nature of this area of study, there are many topics that need to be investigated: the use of prayer as a performance enhancement technique, for example, researchers should consider studying the state and trait cognitive anxiety levels of Christian/Religious athletes; the differences between prayer and other stress management techniques, as methods to decrease state anxiety; which type of interventions may not be appropriate for Christian athletes (Balague, 1999); how prayer may be incorporated into one-to-one sport psychology counseling when appropriate; following the lead of clinical psychology (Brawer, Handal, Fabricatore, Roberts & Wajda-Johnston, 2002), examine how to incorporate religious and spiritual issues into educational models in sport psychology; how a sport psychology consultant with little or no knowledge of an athlete's worldview can provide appropriate support and advice (Watson & Nesti, in press); the ethics of prayer in sport (Kreider, 2003), which would help in the development of professional practice guidelines and educational models in sport psychology; development of sport specific quantitative instruments for measuring prayer and religiosity in sport; cross-cultural studies to explore differences in the use of prayer and religious observances in sport in other countries; in addition to past work (e.g., Abe, 1986; Herrigel, 1971/1999; Wertz, 1977) investigation of the use of meditative techniques and prayer from other religious traditions in sport; levels of team cohesion between groups of Christians and non-Christians. Information obtained from such studies may shed further light on the effects of prayer and religious observances on athletic performance and individual and group behavior; and further studies of prayer in sport using appropriate epistemologies and methodologies, such as existential-phenomenology (Czech et al., 2004; Nesti, 2004) for studying the experiential nature of prayer.

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