

## Superstition & Religious Ritual: An Examination of their Effects and Utilization in Sport

**Anthony M.J. Maranise**

Bishop Byrne Middle & High School

This article discusses the use of superstition and religious rituals within sport. While the popular view among skeptics seems to be that *religious ritual* is nothing more than *superstition*, I argue that while there admittedly are many similarities, there also exist major differences which separate superstition and religious ritual into distinct entities. The realm of sport is one widely known for the numerous exhibitions of both superstition and religious ritual. The examples of sport-related superstition and religious ritual are so numerous that they have even gained noted media attention in the past two decades. Thus, I situate both terms within the practical framework of sport participation. From this foundation, I define both terms in context and begin to examine the effects on athletes' individual holistic development arguing that religious ritual leads ultimately to a greater holistic development than does superstition. Holistic development is examined in four aspects which are comprised of physiology, emotionality, intellectuality, and spirituality. The positive effects of religious ritual as applied within athletics are mentioned in each aforementioned category. I approach the topic from the perspective of the psychology of religion, sports psychology, as well as Judeo-Christian theological concepts regarding religious ritual. The numerous positive benefits of religious ritual over superstition within athletics lead to a final argument that religious ritual provides significant meaning to the lives of athletes in a way which superstition is simply unable.

Individuals who have spent a significant portion of time in the presence of seriously dedicated athletes may have had the opportunity to observe a plethora of both individual and collective behaviors that seem somewhat "foreign" to those outside sporting circles. Undoubtedly, even those who have never observed a sporting event or spent time around athletes have heard that the world of sports, as both a realm of entertainment and human interest, is one permeated by collective adherence to a number of various superstitions and rituals (e.g., Miller, 2008; Lawrence, 2005). Individual athletes also are known to practice certain superstitious or ritualistic behaviors of their own, apart from a collective body, such as their team. Lawrence (2005), in his paper discussing the emergence of 'sport and spirituality' in popular culture, argues that these superstitious or ritualistic behaviors are displays of what traditional religious vernacular might term as 'liturgy' or 'ritual.' It should be noted at the outset that aside from the aforementioned papers relating to both 'sport and spirituality,' little academic attention has been given to this rapidly-increasing popular culture phenomenon, with exception given to Watson & Nesti (2005),

who have published the only paper to date which directly addresses the need for spiritual-integration within sport-psychological consulting. The need for further attention and research in this area should be made all the more evident as individuals continue to witness superstitious and religiously ritualistic behaviors performed by athletes in their respective sports.

Famous examples of such superstitions and rituals abound in the sporting realm to such a degree of frequency that they have been reported by the media (Bagnato, 1997; Kuehls, 1994). Various instances of superstitious practices or rituals might include the rather shocking and grotesque athlete who will wear only one pair of socks for an entire season because they are said to be "lucky." For consideration also is the coach who, before and during his competition, can and will only chew one specific type of gum. In collective view, many athletic teams (including athletes, coaches, and staff), whether affiliated with private or public educational institutions, and sometimes in blatant disregard to rules banning organized religious expression in school sponsored activities, will pause before and after their competition to offer a prayer—for safety, for success, for strength—to God.

While these behaviors common to athletes seem similar to one another, there are vast differences in their scope, meaning, and application. This paper will argue that despite their similarities, "sport superstitions"

---

Maranise is with the Dept. of Religious Studies, Sport Ethics Course Director, Bishop Byrne Middle & High School, Memphis, TN.

should not be confused with or in any way considered to be “religious rituals” and also that “religious rituals” practiced by athletes or integrated into sporting lifestyles promote greater holistic (mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual) well-being and add significant meaning to life in a way that superstitions cannot.

Skeptical culture seems to view the practice of or adherence to religious ritual as being part of, or “one-in-the-same” as, superstition (e.g., Gay, 1995). For purposes of this paper, it is necessary to first, provide an operating framework under which both religious ritual and superstition will be examined to reveal their similarities, but more importantly, their differences. From the established framework and defined differences, it will then be simpler to explain the ways in which religious rituals practiced in sport promote greater holistic well-being and add deeper meaning to human life than do superstitious behaviors and beliefs. Throughout this paper, when the term, religious ritual, is used it will refer, in Judeo-Christian context, to the definition given in Webster’s dictionary: “an act or set of acts regularly repeated in a set or precise manner” which symbolizes the “adherents’ religious practice for communicating with God” (Watson & Czech, 2005, p. 27). In refutation of the predominately secular-dominated understanding of superstition, research in the field of psychology of religion has confirmed that the definition of superstition which does not mention religion is more accurate than one that does (Gorsuch, Hood, Hunsberger, & Spilka, 2003). Thus, when the term, sport superstition, is used within this paper, it will refer to “actions which are repetitive, formal, sequential, distinct from technical performance and which the athletes believe to be powerful in controlling luck or other external factors” (Bleak & Frederick, 1998, p. 2). These definitions provide a navigable operating framework through which sport superstitions and religious rituals may be juxtaposed.

Before delving into the differences between the two practices, it is important to highlight their similarities to understand the reasons why many may contend that religion is nothing more than superstition (Gay, 1995) and thus why they would, by succession, also contend that religious ritual is synonymous with superstition and then to situate both practices in an athletic context. As a point of departure, one must admit that on the surface, it is clear to see how ritual and superstition could be mistaken for the same practice. It is the nature of any ritualistic behavior to include repetition and, in the same vein, many athletes, after finding a superstition which they attribute to their success, repeat their superstitious behaviors. *Continual repetition*, then, can be easily marked as the first and most noticeable similarity between the practices. Arguably, the second similarity is that athletes who engage in either religious ritual or superstition associated with their respective sport do so because they believe that their actions make their performance more effective (Lobmeyer & Wasserman, 1986). Clearly, a serious athlete who is dedicated to bettering himself within his sport—either for his own personal gain or the collective gain of the team—would consider his sport

performance as a personal endeavor. Thus, because the athlete is personally and intimately invested in his performance, it can be reasonably inferred that the practices of either religious rituals or sport superstitions give personal meaning to his activities (e.g., Salah, 2005). Although other similarities exist, one more is noteworthy. In both, there exists a sense of “reaching out beyond the self and being aware of the *other*” (Robinson, 2007, p. 24). The “other” in this sense should be understood as a force beyond human control and total human comprehension; in essence, there exists within this “other,” a notion of mystery outside human constructs, yet with the abilities to somehow transcend them. In this understanding, athletes who practice religious rituals or sport superstitions do so to simultaneously separate a part of themselves from the self so as to rely on the forces which the *other* provides and to experience a deeper interaction with the forces of the *other*. These similarities suggest support for the view that religious ritual is nothing more than a part of superstition; however, as it pertains to sport, there exists a vast array of evidence to the contrary.

According to Vyse (1997), sport superstitions differ from religious rituals applied within sport contexts in that “superstitions emerge as a result of uncertainty to circumstances that are inherently random or uncontrollable” (p. 201). The emergence and subsequent practice of individual or collective athletic superstitions is a fine example of operant conditioning through negative reinforcement. Burke (2005) would argue that the sport environment is likely to be perceived as uncomfortable and thus may lead to higher levels of anxiety for athletes, coaches, and spectators. Should an athlete begin to experience performance anxiety before a competition, his performing a particular superstition may be used to alleviate pressure which weighs on the individual. In this way, the superstitious behavior becomes more than a tool for the removal of performance anxiety, it also becomes a scapegoat. Should an athlete perform poorly in his respective sport, he may fault a failed outcome from the performance of their superstition as the cause for poor performance rather than internalizing and accepting the poor performance as their own. This form of behavior surrounding the practice of athletic superstitions appears very one-dimensional in scope given that superstitions typically arise only as a result of uncertainty and are used to remove anxious feelings caused by such uncertainty. In contrast, the use of religious rituals in sport, especially Christian prayer, (Watson & Czech, 2005) has revealed “a complex multi-dimensional construct” (Miller & Thoresen, 2003, p. 4).

Watson and Czech (2005) argue that the use of religious prayer alleviates anxiety and stress in uncertain situations which may seem similar to the use of “sport superstitions.” In addition, Coakley in 2003 has offered six possible reasons athletes use 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” (p. 28). Each of these reasons for the utilization of prayer, which is the most common “religious ritual” in sports, reveals a vast depth to human cognitive processes which are not found in the practice of “sport superstitions.” Apparently also absent from the practice of “sport superstitions” is the overwhelming sense of control over high-stress and uncertain situations (Matute, 1994). Burke (2006) points out that athletes often feel subject to control by superstitions even though he acknowledges that superstitions usually offer no logical progression that facilitates skill performance. This sense of being controlled may be another stressor added to an already over-burdened athlete. The stress caused by performance anxiety, concerns for team cohesion and collective performance, as well as the fear of shame, humiliation, and parental disappointment are made only more difficult to bear when faced with concerns that a superstition was not performed correctly or at all due to absent-mindedness or distraction before competition. To assist in alleviating some of these stressors and anxieties, many coaches have implemented a “ritual prayer” before and/or after contests in which team athletes often participate (Murray, Joyner, Burke, Wilson, & Zwald, 2005). Participating in a “ritual prayer” as part of a team may be somewhat effective in alleviating anxiety, but it seems reasonable to infer that anxiety would be even more effectively alleviated should an individual athlete engage in personal, private or semiprivate “religious rituals” of their own because these are in-depth cognitive processes.

At this point, the differences between “sport superstitions” and “religious rituals” have been highlighted. Consequently, a clear distinction should be evident in that “sport superstitions” are not synonymous with “religious rituals,” nor should they ever be considered so as they are separate, distinct, and unique entities. These distinctions have already well demonstrated how “religious rituals” applied within a sporting context appear to be more psychologically beneficial to athletes than “sport superstitions,” however it remains necessary to explain the means by which “religious rituals” promote greater holistic well-being for the athlete and add significant meaning to life in a way that superstitions cannot.

When examining how “religious rituals” applied in sports will promote greater holistic well being for the athlete, the following dimensions of holistic human growth will be used: Physiological, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual. According to Ferraro (1999), with respect to the first dimension, physical manifestations of mental or emotional anxiety are widely reported throughout the general population as well as among athletes. In addition, many anxieties experienced by the athlete can and do typically arouse physiological symptoms consistent with those who suffer from generalized anxiety disorder such as pregame sleeplessness, vomiting, nervousness and restlessness. As a means of placating this anxiety, coaches and sport psychologists sometimes encourage the religiously convicted athlete to adopt “religious rituals” such as prayer or meditation as part of their pregame preparations (e.g., Storch, Storch, Kolsky, & Silvestri,

2001). Research investigations in health psychology (e.g., Duckro & Magaletta, 1994; Koenig, 1988; Koenig, McCullough & Larson, 2001), medical science (Bernardi et al., 2001; Leibovici, 2001) and the psychology of religion (Finney & Maloney, 1985; La Torre, 2004; McCullough, 1995), have demonstrated the significant positive psychological and physiological effects of prayer, in particular using prayer to cope with stress and anxiety. It seems, then, reasonable to assert that incorporating “religious rituals” as part of sport participation benefit athletes in a physiological sense by reducing anxiety levels and the physiological manifestations of anxiety, tension, and stress.

Emotional well-being for athletes is benefitted by the integration of “religious rituals” within sporting realms. Anyone who has ever witnessed a sporting contest can clearly recognize as did Ferraro (1999), that shame and embarrassment are possible threats in sports because the game is usually played in front of crowds. This shame and embarrassment which are sometimes experienced by the athlete can lead to significant elevations in anxiety and stress thus the ability to cope with pressure and anxiety is an integral part of playing sports (Hardy, Jones, & Gould, 1996; Orlick & Partington, 1988). Significant levels of anxiety may overwhelm an athlete causing him to feel as if he is losing control over entities which in actuality he has control over such as his attitude, motivation, and reasoning faculties. Burke (2006) found that to alleviate feelings of losing control, religiously “ritualistic behaviors may be found beneficial for promoting more realistic perceptions of control in sports” (p. 9). Feelings of anxiety or tension may vary from athlete to athlete and may also be based on the type of sport situation. However, Humara (1999) noted differences between successful and unsuccessful athletes as a result of their cognitive interpretation of their anxiety states. Many investigations have shown the use of prayer by athletes before, during, and after competition to be both common and valuable practices for enhancing performance and overall well-being (e.g., Czech, Wrisberg, Fisher, Thompson, & Hayes, 2004; Park, 2000; Vernacchia, McGuire, Reardon & Templin, 2000). Through the ways in which “religious rituals” placate feelings of anxiety and espouse feelings of control in uncontrollable circumstances, it appears that such practices would also be beneficial to athletes in the sense of emotional well-being.

In addition to both physiological and emotional well-being, “religious rituals” within sports may also promote and lead to intellectual well-being in terms of educative potential and enhanced learning experiences. Each athlete enters his contest the same way in which they enter a new academic course, or even a new day of life—with uncertainty. Similarly, just as the athlete hopes to achieve victory in his contest, he also ideally hopes to achieve success in academia or in the pursuits of life. The aspirations and abilities, commonly held by athletes include striving for success and persistence in the face of failure which are associated with many forms of achievement motivation (e.g., Gill, 1988; Sager, Lavallee,

& Spray, 2009). Successful achievement of a particular goal, the desired outcome for every athlete, is made possible through gradual learning that is both interior and exterior (Mazza, 2006). These processes of learning take place through both focus and attention to details, whether it is to various plays, exercise regimens, coaching instructions, or even academic work to remain athletically eligible to participate in sport. Watson and Czech (2005) note that in implementing “religious rituals” as part of an athlete’s sport program, a positive relationship emerges between use of prayer and other religious observances as well as an athlete’s levels of skill and attentional focus. Furthermore, several studies have shown that practicing “religious rituals” improves focus on the task at hand by blocking out excessive environmental stimuli, such as fan interruption and any distraction strategies of the opposition (Nideffer, 1976; Womack, 1992). A popular sport situation in which this research may be applied is at the foul-line on a basketball court when an athlete is preparing to shoot free-throws. It is common for opposition to attempt to distract the athlete who is shooting. The athlete can, through focused attention, learn to ignore the distractions around him. Attentiveness and focus, traits which “religious rituals” impart through their nature, allow athletes to “become open to deeper means of educational growth through sports” (Maranise, 2008, p. 2). If educative potential is an outgrowth of participation in “religious rituals,” then the means by which athletes gain educative potential from participation in various “religious rituals” would seem to promote intellectual well-being.

In addition, “religious rituals” add spiritual meaning to life for the athlete in ways that “superstitions” cannot. Participation in “religious rituals,” even within a sporting context, are indissolubly bound together with spirituality in that “religious rituals give personal meaning to theological ideas” (Newberg & Waldman, 2010, p. 41). In the Christian perspective, the ultimate and valued entity would be God in the person of Jesus Christ. Salah (2006) notes that religious rituals such as making the sign of the Cross immediately before a game, displaying and venerating religious items in a locker room, or asking for God’s help in moments of tension and difficulty, are clear signs of an effort to make God present in the daily lives, and all are common among athletes. Without doubt, the competitive nature of sport will often yield circumstances for the athlete which could be described as painful or adverse—either in an emotional, physiological, intellectual, or spiritual sense. As a result, Watson and Czech (2005) have observed that when athletes are confronted with this type of adversity, it is likely they will ask existential and spiritual questions. These authors point out that during these times of existential and spiritual curiosity, many athletes use prayer in sport to “give glory to God” (Czech et al., 2004, p.10) believing that not only in sports, but that in all of life, a person of faith trusts that “nothing is too trivial to bring to God in prayer” (Hoffman, 2010, p. 247). In the use of “religious rituals” within sport, athletes begin to recog-

nize their smallness in the ultimate scope of the universe which, I would argue, brings the athlete into the important virtue of humility. I also suggest that the practice of faith opens them to contact with “the Wholly Other in order to refresh, sustain, and nurture the spirit” (Price, 2009, p. 79). Spiritual growth for athletes occurs through not only the recognition of finiteness as human beings, but also because “through our psychosomatic unity as human persons it can help develop virtues, spiritual strength, and sound morals” (Nesti, 2007, p. 162). By these means, it becomes likely that athletes are also advanced in spiritual well-being as a result of participation in “religious rituals.” As the overwhelming benefits of the use of religious ritual rather than superstitious practices for athletes have now been summarized, the question remains: *What are professionals in the sport psychology field to think (or do) with this information?*

It should again be noted that further research and expanding on this often neglected field of academic research and practical application should be pursued. As previously stated, to date, there has only been one full paper published (Watson & Nesti, 2005) which directly addresses the aforementioned matters of integrating and/or engaging with the spiritual dimensions of athlete’s lives through the practice of sport psychology consulting. This paper is a most valuable asset for further advancing desperately needed research and attention within this area of psychology. Watson and Nesti (2005) contend that while a holistic approach to sport psychological consulting is valuable, underscoring the spiritual dimension of an athlete’s life “denies both the athlete and the sport psychology consultant a valuable tool” (p. 229). In my reading of their research, this “valuable tool” would appear to be a means by which athletes come to develop more mature life-skills as a result of their participation in sports, but more importantly, how they may, spiritually, come to recognize greater “purpose and meaning to human activities and life” (p.230). Recognizing greater “purpose and meaning” through engagement with the individual athlete’s spiritual dimension, then, does not leave the benefit of spirituality only to that which can be harnessed, applied, or explored within a sporting context, but rather to all aspects of life-skill formation and development.

The recognition of greater “purpose and meaning” by means of engaging with an individual athlete’s spiritual dimension would likely include their development of virtues and sound morals as well. This becomes a particular area of concern, however, when properly considering the importance of spirituality for the religiously-convicted athlete. As previously demonstrated sports are inherently competitive and at times, are somewhat of what we might consider a “high-stress-environment.” Given the elevated stress and anxiety potential already placed upon the athlete because their competitions are often played in view of spectators, we might add to our consideration, the reality that many individual athletes might feel pressure to succeed to please an over-bearing parent, coach, or even a teammate. During these moments, an athlete

under such stress might even feel as if though they are “having to compete for [their] own self-worth and value” (Maranise, 2009, p. 1). Undoubtedly, this form of competition is unhealthy because it has the potential to be spiritually destructive as it may cause an athlete to question his worth and value to those individuals in his life who should offer him unconditional positive regard. Such competitive pressures can even lead, dare I say, “force,” athletes to succumb to unsportsmanlike or “unsporting behaviors” to gain their desired successful outcome. Kreider (2003) suggests that certain prayers can be unsporting based on their intention. This would be a case wherein sport psychologists, coaches, parents, etc. should take an active interest in the promotion of sound morals and virtues toward those entrusted to their leadership and care. Kreider argues: “To the extent that prayers ask for God’s assistance in bringing about a desired outcome, such prayers are a kind of unsporting behavior and should be discouraged” (p. 17). His argument, in my assessment, ultimately stems from an understanding that in asking for God’s divine assistance in a sporting contest, one is implicitly asking that God’s intervention or assistance be with one particular side of the contest thus providing a sort of unfair advantage through third-party involvement. I would be inclined to agree with his observation because in praying for assistance or for those athletes who have undoubtedly ever “prayed to win,” there appears to be an element whereby one or multiple individuals seek to “alter the conditions of competitive equality” (p. 18). To simplify in most practical terms: When an athlete “prays to win” or prays even for “divine assistance,” he or she is ultimately asking God to favor one particular side over another. To think that God would ever favor any of those who believe themselves to be “His children” over any others is morally problematic. Psychologically speaking, it may also cause losing athletes to experience spiritual and existential crisis as well as elevated anxiety regarding their spiritual relationship with God as they wrestle with the question: *What did I do (or fail to do) to deserve this loss?* This psychological impact would be especially significant if the losing athlete had also prayed as did the winning athlete. In response to the morally-contentious problem of “prayers for assistance” and/or “praying to win,” Kreider suggests that “requests for assistance in giving the effort are, I think, sporting” (p.22). In his response, he makes clear that the intention of prayers ought to be shifted from a notion of assistance and unfair advantage or winning over to prayers for one’s best effort. Practically explaining this critically-valuable difference to athletes from the youngest to the most seasoned levels of sport participation is a necessary progression toward instilling within them sound morals and virtues informed by their participation in a sporting environment, which as previously discussed, provides numerous opportunities for positive holistic development.

Earlier in this paper it was discussed that when athletes experience adversity, it is likely that they will ask existential and spiritual questions. These existential or spiritual questions can often lead into more than simple

questioning, but can become problematic in character such that they could be described as a “crisis” which can ultimately affect other dimensions of life beyond simply the spiritual. In their paper, Watson and Nesti (2005) raise the relevant question: “If the athlete has spiritual problems, for example a crisis of faith, how does this affect his or her psychological status and sport performance” (pg. 233)? My aforementioned arguments in this paper clearly outline the pressures associated with competitive sport. Taking into account the numerous demands placed on athletes because of their sport-related responsibilities in addition to the other aspects of their life which vie for their attention, one may be more apt to recognize the need for sport psychological consulting or even “therapy” in response to anxieties which could easily develop due to incredible demands placed on the athlete. Religiously convicted athletes—who are the sole concern of this paper—would often express beliefs which “are inextricably bound to their sporting experience and their psychological interpretation of the world” (Watson & Nesti, 2005, pg. 232). Given this reality, sport psychologists are advised to make use of the spiritual dimension present in the lives of athletes with whom they work and to view it, in the words of Watson and Nesti (2005), as a “valuable tool.” In order, then, to facilitate a more responsive session and/or expected outcome with religiously convicted athletes, “it is proposed that sport psychology consultants can include prayer and other religious practices as a useful adjunct” (Watson & Nesti, 2005, pg. 232) to more traditional cognitive behavioral methods. The “other religious practices” spoken of can be alternatively termed “other religious rituals” to conform more precisely to the arguments I have expressed throughout this paper. These “other religious practices/rituals” may be as simple as encouraging an athlete to read portions from philosophical, theological, or psychological works to develop more critical and self-reflective thought (Nesti, 2004) within themselves or as complex as arranging and implementing sport psychological interventions which “encourage greater self-awareness, a search for meaning, and absorption in the activity” (Watson & Nesti, 2005, pg. 235) and can thus aide in both an athlete’s spiritual growth and development as well as their general performance in their sport.

Beyond the seemingly-more-abstract forms of engaging with an athlete’s individual spiritual dimension such as having them read from works of philosophy, theology, and psychology and encouraging reflection upon these works, there exist numerous practical methods of psychologically engaging with the athlete’s spiritual dimension. Many of these methods integrate the value which an athlete may place in a sacred text (such as the *Holy Bible*) with the value they also place in their respective performance in and knowledge of their sport through what Pena (2004) refers to as “mental-game techniques.” In this section, I will highlight three of his “mental-game techniques” in efforts to both explain their importance as valuable sport-psychological methods as well as to situate their importance within the larger argument that an

athlete's embrace of religious ritual rather than superstition provides a vast wealth of opportunities for positive holistic development. For purposes of concision, these "mental-game techniques" will be explored only from the perspective of the Christian religious tradition. However, it should be noted that those of other traditions could supplement their respective texts in place of the Christian scriptures and likely still derive from participation in these techniques similar results as a religiously-convicted Christian athlete might.

Useful in helping religiously-convicted Christian athletes with negative performance related to deep-seated self-confidence issues is what Pena identifies as "positive self-talk." Within the explanation of this technique, Pena (2004) explains that self-talk is the way in which an individual athlete speaks to himself before, during, and after a competition. To differentiate between the two extremes of self-talk (positive or negative) one might be apt to experience, Pena reveals that "positive self-talk is the use of constructive language to direct or assess performance" (p. 9). He cleverly and appropriately relates this to a foundation in the Christian scriptures by explaining how it is the desire of God in Jesus Christ for the lives of the Christian faithful (in this case, the Christian athlete) to trust in ourselves and our own abilities because God Himself fully trusts in us. Relying on the scripture passage from St. Paul's letter to the Philippians which reads, "I can do everything with the help of Christ who gives me the strength I need" (Philippians 4:13), Pena calls the Christian athlete to focus not on the aforementioned morally-contentious act of "praying for assistance" or "praying to win," but rather in imitating the actions of the divine entity which Christian athletes ultimately value most, namely, Jesus Christ. Pena ensures the athlete that "Christ wants you to trust in yourself" (p. 9) and ultimately that self-trust will be necessary to perform to the best of one's ability thus it is necessary for the Christian athlete to talk to his or herself in a way which is constructive and nonjudgmental. In very practical terms, he suggests that when an athlete is analyzing their performance, rather than criticizing his or herself, the athlete should simply "describe and correct your behavior" while avoiding being judgmental because "judgmental thinking promotes a mentality geared toward failure" (p. 11). An illustrative example of how this technique could be successfully carried-out would be to consider the golfer who generally hits a poor shot from the rough because she has the tendency to look up from the ball before it is struck with the club. To judgmentally assess one's performance, the golfer might say to herself, "*This is the worst part of my game!*" whereas a merely descriptive assessment might sound like, "*Next time, I need to keep my head down.*" In this technique, the goal is to encourage the building of self-confidence within the athlete which is accomplished by relating faith in one's own abilities to a strength one finds in religious faith. The athlete is told from the scripture passage—that which Christians believe is the inerrant Word of God—that he already possesses strength to face his adversity because God has given it

to him. From this faith in his belief, he can then proceed toward correcting or adjusting his athletic behaviors based on his own efforts thus the athlete gains self-confidence by trusting that if God has confidence in him then he also should have it because to do so is imitating the action of the ultimate or most valued being for the Christian athlete—Jesus Christ.

Yet another technique Pena (2004) encourages is the diffusion of worry through prayer, the most common form of religious ritual. For purposes of clarity, "worry" in this instance refers to cognitive anxiety (an interior process) rather than somatic anxiety (a physiological manifestation and thus an exterior process). He explains to the athlete-reader of his work that a certain degree of somatic anxiety is helpful because it arouses alertness within, but "the athlete who worries throughout a particular contest will nearly always do worse than the athlete who minimizes worry" (p. 66). To provide a practical means of applying this technique, Pena encourages the Christian athlete to embrace an active prayer-life and to bring their fears and concerns to God. Again, relying on what is ultimately valued for Christians (Jesus Christ's Word through the sacred scriptures), he references St. Paul's letter to the Philippians wherein it reads, "Don't worry about anything, instead pray about everything and in so doing, you will experience the peace of God which passes all human understanding" (Philippians 4:6-7). Here, praying on the part of the athlete is in no way to be viewed as "prayer for assistance" or "prayer to win," but rather a type of "prayer to attain peace" from worry in the form of somatic anxiety. The scripture explains that the athlete (or the faithful Christian believer) will experience peace as a result of her prayer, thus if the Christian athlete prays, then based on the strength of her belief in the scriptures, she ought to feel some alleviation or "peace" from her anxieties. As previously noted in this paper, the religious ritual of Christian prayer, in this instance, seems to act as a coping mechanism for a stressful situation (Coakley, 2003).

A final technique offered by Pena (2004) relates to yet another multidimensional aspect of prayer as a religious ritual which is the establishment of a strong bond between teammates (cf. Coakley, 2003) through cohesion rather than conflict. He introduces and explains how conflict can be detrimental to the overall success of teams and offers that the proper steps to avoid these detrimental effects are to act cohesively with other members of one's team. Pena explains that "cohesion refers to the dynamic process of a team sticking together and remaining united in the pursuit of specific objectives" (p. 123). To somewhat "systematically ground" this technique in religious ritual, he provides several scripture passages for the individual athlete's personal reflection, however, the overarching characteristic present in each of the scripture portions is that they all convey the idea of unity in creation and an attitude of mutual respect for one another. Christians of nearly every denomination subscribe to the fundamental theology that each human person is created *imago Dei* or "in the image and likeness of God" and that

special and sacred creation is what makes them worthy and deserving of respect. This specific technique is given a practical means of implementation as Pena offers three basic “guidelines” by which to avoid conflict and promote team cohesion: “Be a good listener, respect your teammates, and don’t let jealousy and selfish ambition be a part of you” (pg. 123–124). Each of these “guidelines” appeals to the aforementioned fundamental Christian theology of respect for one another’s equal creation “in the image and likeness of God” such that it is evident also that through this final technique for consideration, the active embrace of religious ritual or engagement with an individual athlete’s spiritual dimension provides the opportunity for positive holistic growth and development through various multidimensional elements.

Before concluding, it should once again be noted that further research in this often neglected field within sport psychology should be pursued beyond that of which is the scope and competency of this paper. At the intersection of an athlete’s spiritual dimension and/or their adherence to and belief in religious rituals, there exists a remarkable opportunity to assist them not only in developing their performance in their respective sport, but in finding other means by which involvement in sporting activities “produces meaningful relationships, promotes social links, encourages holistic well-being, and assists the athlete in the development of self-knowledge and the formation of his own personality” (Constantini & Lixey, 2011, p. 24). Once again, the multidimensional aspects of adherence to religious rituals for athletes cannot be understated in their importance for they provide opportunities for utilization in sport psychological consulting, therapeutic techniques, and life-coaching which ultimately concretize and provide visible, experiential outcomes to what many have long-viewed as merely abstract and intangible. Much of this paper has discussed only prayer as the primary religious ritual used by athletes, however, Price (2009) argues that “the act of praying can be understood as an act of playing, and that acts of playing can be construed as acts of prayer” (p. 57). This perspective implies, then, that acts of competition, sports training, etc. all have the potential to be practiced as some form of religious ritual and consequently, to provide even more opportunities to holistically uplift, strengthen, and educate athletes who participate in sport of all varieties. He further argues that which I would be inclined to agree with: athletes ultimately do not engage in religious rituals or prayer because they are attempting to somehow sanctify or consecrate a profane activity like a competition, but rather because they already assume that the activities they are undertaking are sacred (cf. Price, 2009, pg. 78). Through this recognition, be it explicit or implicit, the athlete is able to view even the sporting activities of her life as a continual offering to the divine.

In conclusion, it is important to be sensitive to the needs for performance and/or generalized anxiety alleviation within athletes because their potentially high-stress environments promote it with each competition. Athletes will often turn, individually or collectively, to

some anxiety alleviating activity should their anxiety become burdensome enough. However, as previously demonstrated, it seems that athletes will benefit greater from participation in “religious rituals” rather than “sport superstitions” because of the multidimensional benefits associated with ritual. Most importantly, “religious rituals” provide meaning to the lives of athletes in a way that superstitions cannot. It is consistent with human nature to seek a purpose for existence or for performing certain laborious activities. The continual participation in sport on the part of the religiously-convicted athlete may lead him to find that the purpose he seeks through his play exists through the ways in which his participation “offers repetitive opportunities to stimulate the formation of so many human virtues that are useful both on and off the field of play” (Constantini & Lixey, 2011, p. 45). Conversely, “sport superstitions” do not provide any sort of meaning or significance to the performance of sporting activities and have the tendency to “reduce everything that is human to the inanimate and consequentially be spiritually destructive” (Mieth, 2006, p. 25). However, according to Vernacchia et al., (2000), “religious rituals,” associated with an athlete’s spiritual or religious beliefs seem to provide a deeper meaning to athletic successes, failures, struggles, and disappointments thus the numerous positive benefits of religious ritual over superstition within sport lead to a final argument that religious ritual provides significant meaning to the lives of athletes in a way which superstition is simply unable.

### Acknowledgments

I am deeply indebted to Rena Durr, Ph.D., former professor of Psychology at Christian Brothers University in Memphis, Tennessee, for her guidance and support throughout the composition of this paper and for her friendship and wisdom—so understanding over the years. Furthermore, without the inspiration and encouragement of my coach and mentor, Mr. Bubba Lockett; my brother, Mr. David Carney, Jr.; the editors/reviewers at TSP and HK; and my parents—this paper may never have taken shape. I thank God for each of you.

### References

- Bagnato, A. (1997). Very superstitious. *Sporting News*, 221, 41.
- Bernardi, L., Sleight, P., Bandinelli, G., Cencetti, S., Fattorini, J.W., & Lagi, L. (2001). Effect of rosary prayer and yoga mantras on autonomic cardiovascular rhythms: Comparative study. *British Medical Journal*, 323, 1446–1449. [PubMed doi:10.1136/bmj.323.7327.1446](https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.323.7327.1446)
- Bleak, J.L., & Frederick, C.M. (1998). Superstitious behavior in sport: Levels of effectiveness and determinants of use in three collegiate sports. *Journal of Sport Behavior*, 21, 1–15.
- Burke, K.L. (2006). An exploratory investigation of superstition, personal control, optimism and pessimism in NCAA Division I Intercollegiate student-athletes. *Athletic Insight: The Online. Journal of Sport Psychology*, 8(2), 2–5, 9.
- Coakley, J.J. (2003). *Sport in Society* (8th ed.). Boston: Irwin McGraw-Hill.

- Constantini, E., & Lixey, K. (2011). Educating through sport. In *Sport & St. Paul: A Course for Champions* (pp. 23–29). Rome: The John Paul II Sports Foundation.
- Constantini, E., & Lixey, K. (2011). Sport virtues. In *Sport & St. Paul: A Course for Champions* (pp. 41–45). Rome: The John Paul II Sports Foundation.
- Czech, D.R., Burke, K.L., Joyner, A.B., & Hardy, C.J. (2002). An examination of NCAA Division I athlete's optimism, pessimism and sport orientation levels. *International Sports Journal*, 6, 136–146.
- Czech, D.R., Wrisberg, C., Fisher, L., Thompson, C., & Hayes, G. (2004). The experience of Christian prayer in sport – An Existential Phenomenological Investigation. *Journal of Psychology and Christianity*, 2, 1–19.
- Duckro, P.N., & Magaletta, P.R. (1994). The effect of prayer on physical health: Experimental evidence. *Journal of Religion and Health*, 33, 211–219. doi:10.1007/BF02354912
- Ferraro, T. (1999). A psychoanalytic perspective on anxiety in athletes. *Athletic Insight: The Online. Journal of Sport Psychology*, 1(2), 15–21.
- Finney, J.R., & Maloney, H.N. (1985). An empirical study of contemplative prayer as an adjunct to psychotherapy. *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 13(4), 284–290.
- Gay, P. (1995). *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation. The Rise of Freedom. Vol 2.* New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 100.
- Gill, D.L. (1988). Gender differences in competitive orientation and sport participation. *International Journal of Sport Psychology*, 19, 145–159.
- Hardy, L. (1990). A catastrophe model of anxiety and performance. In J.T. Jones & L. Hardy (Eds.), *Stress and performance in Sport* (pp. 81–106). Chichester: Wiley.
- Hardy, L., Jones, G., & Gould, D. (1996). *Understanding Psychological Preparation for Sport: Theory and Practice of Elite Performers.* Chichester: Wiley.
- Helminiak, D.A. (1996). A scientific spirituality: The interface of psychology and theology. *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 6(1), 1–19. doi:10.1207/s15327582ijpr0601\_1
- Hoffman, S.J. (2010). Prayer out of bounds. In *Good Game: Christianity and the Culture of Sports* (pp. 239–262). Waco, TX: Baylor University Press.
- Humara, M. (1999). The relationship between anxiety and performance: a cognitive-behavioral perspective. *Athletic Insight: The Online. Journal of Sport Psychology*, 1(2), 1–3.
- Koenig, H.G. (1988). Religious behaviors and death anxiety in later life. *The Hospice Journal*, 4, 3–24. PubMed doi:10.1300/J011v04n01\_02
- Koenig, H.G., McCullough, M.E., & Larson, D.B. (2001). *The handbook on religion and health.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kreider, A.J. (2003). Prayers for assistance as unsporting behavior. *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, XXX, 17–25. doi:10.1080/00948705.2003.9714557
- Kuehls, D. (1994). Very superstitious. *Runner's World*, 19, 38–40.
- La Torre, M.A. (2004). Prayer in psychotherapy: an important consideration. *Perspectives in Psychiatric Care*, 40(1), 39–40. PubMed
- Lawrence, I. (2005). The emergence of 'sport and spirituality' in popular culture. *The Sport Journal*, 8(2), 1–5.
- Leibovici, L. (2001). Effects of remote, retroactive intercessory prayer on outcomes in patients with bloodstream infection: Randomized controlled trial. *British Medical Journal*, 323, 1450–1451. PubMed doi:10.1136/bmj.323.7327.1450
- Lobmeyer, D., & Wasserman, E.A. (1986). Preliminaries to free throw shooting: superstitious behavior? *Journal of Sport Behavior*, 9, 70–78.
- Maranise, A.M.J. (2009) Practice makes perfect: Growing Spiritually through Sports participation. *The Catholic World: A Journal at the Intersection of Faith and Culture*, 243(1453), 1 – 4.
- Matute, H. (1994). Learned helplessness and superstitious behavior as opposite effects of uncontrollable reinforcement in humans. *Learning and Motivation*, 25, 216–232. doi:10.1006/lmot.1994.1012
- Mazza, C. (2006). Sport as viewed from the Church's Magisterium. In S. Rylko (Ed.), *The world of sport today: a field of Christian mission* (pp. 55–73). Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana.
- McCullough, M.E. (1995). Prayer and health: conceptual issues, research review, and research agenda. *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 23, 15–29.
- Mieth, D. (2006). Towards an ethic of sport in contemporary culture. In S. Rylko (Ed.), *The world of sport today: a field of Christian mission* (pp. 23–43). Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana.
- Miller, T. (2008). Sport & spirituality: A comparative perspective. *The Sport Journal*, 11(3), 1–9.
- Miller, W., & Thoresen, C. (2003). Spirituality and Health. In W. Miller (Ed.), *Integrating Spirituality into Treatment* (pp. 3–18). Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association.
- Murray, M.A., Joyner, A.B., Burke, K.L., Wilson, M.J., & Zwald, A.D. (2005). The relationship between prayer and team cohesion in collegiate softball teams. *Journal of Psychology and Christianity*, 24, 233–239.
- Nesti, M. (2007). Suffering, sacrifice, sport psychology and the spirit. In J. Parry, S. Robinson, N. Watson, & M. Nesti (Eds.), *Sport and Spirituality: An Introduction* (pp. 151–169). London: Routledge.
- Newberg, M.D. A., and Waldman, M.R. (2010). *How God changes your brain.* New York, NY: Ballantine Books.
- Nideffer, R. (1976). Test of attentional and interpersonal style. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 34, 394–404. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.34.3.394
- Orlick, T., & Partington, J. (1988). Mental links to excellence. *The Sport Psychologist*, 2, 105–130.
- Park, J. (2000). Coping strategies by Korean national athletes. *The Sport Psychologist*, 14, 63–80.
- Parry, J., Robinson, S., Watson, N.J., & Nesti, M. (Ed.). (2007). *Sport and spirituality: an introduction.* New York: Routledge: Taylor and Francis Group.
- Pena, D. dl. (2004). *Scripture and sport psychology.* (pp. 9-126). New York, NY: iUniverse, Inc.
- Price, J.L. (2009). Playing and praying, sport and spirit: The forms and functions of prayer in sports. *International Journal of Religion and Sport*, 1, 55–80.



- Ritual. (2011). m-w.com. Encyclopedia Britannica Company. Retrieved January 15, 2011 from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ritual?show=1&t=1295248106>
- Robinson, S. (2007). Spirituality: a working definition. In J. Parry, S. Robinson, N. Watson, & M. Nesti (Eds.), *Sport and Spirituality: An Introduction* (pp. 22–37). London: Routledge.
- Sager, S.S., Lavalley, D., & Spray, C.M. (2009). Coping with the Effects of Fear and Failure: A Preliminary Investigation of Young Elite Athletes. *Journal of Clinical Sports Psychology, 3*, 73–98.
- Salah, A. (2006). Christian presence in sporting institutions. In S. Rylko (Ed.), *The world of sport today: a field of Christian mission* (pp. 127–130). Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana.
- Spilka, B., Hood, R.W., Jr., Hunsberger, B., & Gorsuch, R. (2003). *The psychology of religion: an empirical approach*. New York: The Guildford Press.
- Storch, E.A., Kolsky, A.R., Silvestri, M., & Storch, J.B. (2001). Religiosity of Elite College Athletes. *The Sport Psychologist, 15*, 346–351.
- Vernacchia, R.A., McGuire, R.T., Reardon, J.P., & Templin, D.P. (2000). Psychosocial characteristics of Olympic track and field athletes. *International Journal of Sport Psychology, 31*, 5–23.
- Vyse, S.A. (1997). *Believing in magic*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Watson, N.J., & Czech, D.R. (2005). The use of prayer in sport: Implications for sport psychology consulting. Athletic Insight: The Online. *Journal of Sport Psychology, 7*(4), 26–31.
- Watson, N.J., & Nesti, M. (2005). The Role of Spirituality in Sport Psychology Consulting: An Analysis and Integrative Review of Literature. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology, 17*, 228–239. doi:10.1080/10413200591010102
- Womack, M. (1992). Why athletes need ritual. In S. Hoffman (Ed.), *Sport and Religion (191 – 202)*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.