Sport and the Christian Faith: The Experiences of Christian Athletes in Competitive Sport

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Author's Declaration

I declare that the work in this thesis was carried out in accordance with the regulations of the University of Gloucestershire and is original except where indicated by specific reference in the text. No part of the thesis has been submitted as part of any other academic award. The thesis has not been presented to any other education institution in the United Kingdom or overseas.

Any views expressed in the thesis are those of the author and in no way represent those of the University.

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Abstract

In recent years there has been a significant increase in the literature surrounding the relationship between sport and Christianity, yet little is known about the experiences of Christian athletes themselves. Drawing on the findings of a small-scale qualitative study, this thesis investigates the relationship between sport and the Christian faith in the lives of 25 UK-based Christian athletes who participated in competitive sport. The study seeks to provide insight into how respondents negotiated the demands and expectations of competitive sport alongside their faith-based values and beliefs, and how this manifested at the personal level. Athlete experiences focus on three key areas: evangelism, prayer and worship, all of which raised their own tensions and dilemmas in terms of personal circumstance. Findings demonstrate that the combining of sport and faith was far from straight forward with the whole notion of 'competition' being identified as being particularly complex. In seeking to resolve the issues they encountered in meeting the expectations of both Christianity and sport, athletes found themselves constantly navigating the prioritization of sporting and faith-based values. The thesis concludes that athlete approaches to sport remained largely unchanged, and their approaches to faith were often modified to align with sporting involvement.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

This chapter begins by identifying what the study sought to achieve and briefly outlines the relationship between sport[1] and religion. Christian[2] athletes are faced with the task of living out their religious beliefs within a secular context, the nuances of which appear to be in tension with their world view. The combining of the two activities raises the question of how Christian athletes navigate and negotiate the relationship between sport and faith at a personal level. There is little empirical research into the experiences of Christian athletes in the environment of competitive sport and this thesis serves as some kind of corrective in this respect. The chapter locates the athletes themselves as central to the research so bringing greater understanding to the relationship between sport and Christianity. This brings the potential for practitioners in the fields of both sport and faith to assist Christian athletes as they seek to live out their faith in the environment of competitive sport.

The Research Context: Sport and Religion

Scholars in the disciplines of history and anthropology have long since demonstrated how the links between sport and religion go back to the origins of sport (e.g., Baker, 1988, 2007, 2010; Brasch, 1970; Guttmann, 1978, 1988). Sport, which historically

[1] [1] The word ‘sport’ is used here in its widest sense in accordance with the definition provided by The Council of Europe Charter on Sport (2021, p.12): “Sport means all forms of physical activity, which through casual or organised participation, aim at expressing or improving physical fitness and mental well-being, forming social relationships or obtaining results in competition at all levels” (see: https://www.coe.int/en/web/sport/european-sports-charter).

[2] For the purposes of the present discussion, the term 'Christian' is used to denote any individual who pertains to and/or aligns themselves with a biblically-based world view.

included activities such as running, jumping, throwing, wrestling and ball games, was conceived as a religious ritual to gain favour with the Gods. This caused sport and religious ritual to be inextricably linked. Overtime the relationship has undergone much change (e.g., Ellis, 2014; Harvey 2014; Soltes, 2021; Watson, 2007a; Watson & Parker, 2013). This change is evident in the relationship between sport and Christianity, the religious faith which is the focus of the present study. For example, there have been periods where sport and Christianity have been considered compatible such as during the Victorian era when sport was valued as a means of developing moral character (Erdozain, 2011; Parker & Weir, 2012). At other times, the relationship has been more hostile. This includes the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century and the Puritans who believed that they served God best by applying themselves wholeheartedly to their work. Activities participated in for personal pleasure, including sport and play, were viewed unfavourably and considered to have little spiritual value (Overman, 1997; Struna, 1997). Today sport is essentially a secular activity and a dominant cultural form in its own right (Blazer, 2012; Price, 2001; Scholes & Sassower, 2013). It is in this modern-day secular context that Christian athletes endeavour to live out their faith and it is the combining of their Christian faith with sport that this study seeks to understand. In addition to adding primary evidence to the existing knowledge base, the resulting enhanced understanding of the relationship between sport and Christianity will assist practitioners in the fields of both sport and religion in their work with Christian athletes.

The Research Problem: How Christian Athletes combine Sport and Religion

Initial interest in the relationship between sport and Christianity emerged slowly and began in North America around the end of 1960s and early 1970s. This interest was

initially evident in articles in Church periodicals (Brasch, 1970) and popular sports magazines (Deford, 1976a, 1976b, 1976c, 1976d). These were primarily located within the area of the social sciences including sociology, philosophy and psychology and built on the earlier work of historians and anthropologists. With the cultural significance of sport continuing to grow other disciplines, including theology and the philosophy of religion, entered the discussion. The present study is located within the broader sports studies tradition, drawing upon work from all of the above fields with the aim of presenting a more interdisciplinary understanding of the relationship between sport and Christianity.

Reviewing the literature on the relationship between sport and Christianity initially necessitated consideration of the work focusing on the wider sport and religion interface. The first systematic study in this area was provided by Novak (1967/1994) in his seminal monograph *The Joy of Sports.* For Novak (1967/1994), a Catholic author and philosopher, sport and religion share many similarities and because of this he believed that sport should be considered a form of religion. It is from these foundations that others have contributed material on the sport-religion interface. The earliest of this literature tended to take a simplistic view of the relationship considering it from two contrasting perspectives. On the one hand, sport and religion were seen a complimenting each other whilst a more critical consideration saw a relationship that created tensions and was therefore problematic. Much of this initial literature was desk-based and focused predominantly on the relationship between sport and religion in North America and although existing under the guise of religion, it was dominated by a Christian world view. Furthermore, it focused on the elite level of sport and an evangelical approach to the Christian faith. This trend continued in the early, albeit

limited, empirical contributions to consideration of the relationship (e.g., Dunn & Stevenson, 1998; Kelley, Hoffman & Gill, 1990; Stevenson, 1991, 1997). As a result, there was a gap in the study beyond this cultural context.

More recently there has been a marked increase in interest in the relationship between sport and Christianity (Adogame, Parker & Watson, 2020; Hemmings, Watson & Parker, 2019; Hoven, Parker & Watson, 2019; Treat, 2015; Trothen, 2019; Watson & Parker, 2020). This has led to widening interest from different academic disciplines which, in turn, have increased the levels of discussion and debate. This interest has not been reflected to the same extent in empirical research (Watson & Parker, 2014) with little attention being given to the experiences of the athletes themselves.

This research project began in 2003 prior to the more recent growth in academic scholarship around the relationship between sport and Christianity and before almost any empirical consideration of this topic within the UK context. Consequently, research into how Christian athletes might navigate and negotiate the demands and expectations of competitive sport alongside their faith-based activities could be legitimately seen as an early intervention in this area. In turn this work acts as some form of corrective to the historical and ongoing prevalence of male scholars in the area, presenting as it does an empirical account of the sport/Christianity interface by a female researcher. In this sense, the present study offers a fresh and alternative perspective to the relationship between sport and faith, helping to pave the way for future female researchers.

Furthermore, at the inception of the research the majority of studies concerning the relationship between sport and Christianity centred primarily on the lives of elite evangelical athletes and were predominantly desk-based, drawing largely on anecdotal evidence and the subjective offerings of the authors. This highlighted significant limitations in the formulation of this work in that it paid little attention to the lived experiences of Christian athletes and their participation in competitive sport. The present study seeks to address these limitations by presenting empirical evidence on a wider range of (sporting) ability levels, across a greater range of Christian denominations. In doing so, it serves to address a number of gaps in the existing literature, whilst also extending the knowledge base in the field.

Research Question

Given the above context, this aim of this study is to qualitatively explore the relationship between sport and Christianity in a sample of UK-based Christian athletes. The study aims to build upon and extend the existing theoretical work relating to how Christian athletes combine sport and faith focusing on the lived experiences of respondents. Furthermore, it seeks to broaden understanding by considering the perspectives of athletes from a wide range of sports, ability levels and Christian denominations.

In seeking to undertake an in-depth exploration of the experiences of respondents the study has three main objectives. The first considered how athletes combined their participation in competitive sport with their Christian faith. The second objective looked to identify the kinds of issues which athletes encountered in aligning their Christian worldview with their participation in sport. The third and final objective sought

to examine the strategies that athletes adopted in order to resolve these issues. The research question summarises these objectives and was framed as follows: How do Christian athletes navigate and negotiate the demands and expectations of competitive sport alongside their faith-based activities? To this end, the study presents findings from a series of semi-structured interviews with 25 Christian athletes. Having addressed what the thesis seeks to achieve, this chapter now considers how the research might prove beneficial to further academic research as well as possible developments in assisting Christian athletes who seek to live out their faith in competitive sport.

Significance of the Research: Qualitative Research into the Experiences of Christian athletes in Combining Sport and Faith

The primary significance of the current study is that it makes an original, empirical contribution to the growing scholarship into the relationship between sport and the Christian faith. Despite increased interest in this area, empirical research appears limited, save for the offerings of a small number of writers (e.g., Hoven, 2016; Kretschmann & Benz, 2012b; Schroeder & Scribner, 2006). That said, this limited literature has been supplemented by primary research into very specific areas of the sport-Christianity relationship including prayer (e.g., Lee, 2003), the sacrificing of health for performance (Sinden, 2012) and sports chaplaincy (Daniels, 2022; Oliver & Parker, 2019; Roe & Parker, 2016; Fleming & Parker, 2022; King, Parker & Hemmings, 2020; Whitmore, 2021). As a consequence, at present, existing evidence pointing to the relationship between sport and Christianity is limited in providing a comprehensive understanding of how Christian athletes combine sport and faith. By locating the athletes themselves as its central focus, this research provides a greater depth of

understanding to the sport-Christianity interface. In doing so, there is the potential for practitioners both in the field of sport (i.e., coaches, sports psychologists) and those in the field of religion (i.e., clerics, chaplains) to attain a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between sport and the Christian worldview. With greater knowledge of the sport-Christianity interface from the perspective of the athletes themselves these practitioners would be better equipped to assist Christian athletes as they seek to live out their faith in the environment of competitive sport. Furthermore, the intention is that this study will reveal additional areas for further and extensive academic enquiry.

Limitations of the Research

As noted above, empirical inquiry into the lived experiences of Christian athletes in combining sport and faith has been limited, particularly in the UK. This lack of empirical evidence created challenges for the current research. The existing literature provided some assistance to the study. However, with its focus primarily being elite North American sport there were significant differences to that experienced by the UK-based athletes featured here. A further limitation came from difficulties in enlisting Christian athletes as respondents. Such individuals account for a small proportion of athletes in the UK and tend to be more difficult to identify than their US counterparts who compete in a context dominated by an evangelical perspective. In taking the opportunity sport provides for them to proclaim their faith, these US athletes become easily identifiable. As a result, help was sought in the recruitment process by contacting a number of UK-based para-church organisations, all of which had a remit around sport. Given this method of recruitment, there was the potential for forthcoming

respondents to reflect the views of their respective organisations and/or those to which they were allied, and this should be taken into account by the reader.

Thesis Structure

Following the present introduction, Chapter Two explores and reviews the existing literature regarding the relationship between sport and religion, and in particular, Christianity. It begins by highlighting the extent of the literature regarding 'Sport, Spirituality and Religion'. It then moves to offer a more detailed exploration of two of its main themes; 'Sport and Religion' and 'Sport, Religion and Culture'. Within these themes particular attention is given to the areas that are considered significant to the research question. Following the in-depth interrogation of the extant literature, the chapter concludes that previous work concerning these particular topics are predominantly both desk-based and US centric, focusing largely on elite, evangelical Christian athletes. In turn, the chapter identifies the need for further research which focuses on the lived experience of Christian athletes. The chapter also concludes that there is a necessity for study of a broader cultural context and a wider range of Christian denominations and sporting ability levels.

Chapter Three continues the review of the existing literature by focusing on 'The Spirituality of Sport' and 'Sport, Religion and Ethics', themes which also feature significantly in the extant literature. As in Chapter Two, this section prioritizes the areas considered most relevant to the research question. The chapter acknowledges the inclusion of primary evidence relating to Christian athletes' experiences of competitive sport, however, once again the literature appears to lack research into the lived experiences of Christian athletes and is over-reliant on theoretical considerations of

these areas. Furthermore, the literature is, once again, dominated by a North American perspective and deals primarily with elite evangelical athletes. This leads to a call for primary research which goes beyond the confines of the existing evidence. In concluding, this chapter upholds the findings of the previous chapter.

Chapter Four presents the research methods deployed in the study. It locates the study within the social sciences and addresses the ontological, epistemological and methodological issues in play. Attention is given to the methodological strategy considered most appropriate given the qualitative basis of the research design. It explains the processes deployed in participant recruitment, and data collection and analysis. The chapter also highlights how academic rigour was pursued throughout the research process.

Chapter Five is the first of four chapters which present the empirical findings of the research and focuses on sport as an opportunity for evangelism. The chapter explores the reasons athletes combined sport and the Christian faith in this way and discusses how respondents achieved this end. It presents insights into the strategies athletes adopted to sport as evangelism and identifies both explicit and implicit approaches to sharing faith. Furthermore, it highlights some of the issues athletes face in an environment whose goals differ markedly to those of their faith. As well as considering the sharing of the Christian message through a competitive context, the chapter also looks at similar intentions by the athletes in the social contexts that came with their sporting participation and debates whether it is the competitive or the social environment which proves more conducive to their intentions.

Chapter Six explores in more depth the combining of sport and faith on the part of respondents and, more specifically, the notion of sport as a form of worship. By looking further into understandings of the term 'worship', the discussion seeks to uncover respondent interpretations of sport as worship and the personal manifestations of this. The chapter identifies styles of worship which differ from traditional corporate worship whilst participation in sport remains largely unchanged. Furthermore, it notes how more personal styles of worship and devotion are not without their complexities. The discussion also examines the tensions which respondents encounter in their pursuit of sport as worship, highlighting the issues they faced and their attempts to resolve them.

Chapter Seven sees attention move to an activity often intimately related to worship, that of prayer, an activity which is identified as central component in the combining of sport and Christianity for respondents. Initial consideration is given to how and why respondents combined these two activities with discussion highlighting the prayer routines adopted by respondents in relation to their participation in sport. In-depth consideration is also given to the content of the prayers offered by respondents. The chapter closes by considering the impact of both a prayer routine and the content of respondents' prayers on their participation in sport, discussing the benefits, particularly from a psychological perspective, they provide for athletes.

It is the combining of the Christian faith, with its emphasis on the needs of others, and the element of competition, with its focus on the self, which is examined in Chapter Eight. The chapter commences by exploring respondents' attitude to this element of sport and how this meets with the sporting culture. This is followed by an examination

of some of the issues respondents encountered as Christians in the meeting with the demands and expectations of competitive sport. This leads to a consideration of the extent, and their reasons for, the moral and ethical boundaries of Christian athletes when competing. Further attention to these parameters is given in the final section of the chapter which discusses the moral and ethical decision-making for professional athletes.

Chapter Nine draws together the conclusions of the research. The chapter also provides suggestions regarding further opportunities for academic study of the combining of sport and faith by Christian athletes. From a practical perspective, it identifies areas of the sport-Christianity interface in which athletes would benefit from support from practitioners in the fields of both sport and Christianity.

The study concludes that in seeking to navigate and negotiate the demands and expectations of competitive sport alongside their faith-based activities, respondents encountered a series of tensions and contradictions between sport and their religious beliefs. Despite seeking to resolve these tensions through what they perceived to be the expectations and requirements of their faith, it was their participation in sport which remained largely unchanged whilst their approach to their faith was frequently modified.

Chapter 2: The Sport and Christianity Landscape

Introduction

In order to undertake an initial analysis of the relationship between sport and Christianity, this chapter begins by locating scholarly work in this area within the context of wider academic debate. It does so by dissecting this literature into three component parts. The chapter begins by focusing on the relationship between 'Sport, Spirituality and Religion' where attention is drawn to the dominance of the Christian faith and North American based perspectives within this particular body of work. The chapter then moves to an exploration of two other themes prominent in the extant literature, namely 'Sport and Religion' and 'Sport, Religion and Culture', both of which often surface amidst debates concerning sport, spirituality and religion. Within these themes particular attention is paid to the areas of prayer and evangelism, areas of particular relevance to the present study. The chapter concludes by pulling together key themes from across these distinct fields of enquiry whilst at the same time highlighting gaps in existing research.

Sport, Spirituality and Religion

An exploration of the early literature on the relationship between sport and Christianity points to the work of two authors, Michael Novak and Frank Deford, both of whom expressed contrasting opinions on the relationship between sport and religion. Novak (1967/1994), a Catholic author and philosopher, produced the first systematic analysis of the sport-religion interface. His seminal monograph, *The Joys of Sports* focused on the relationship between sport and religion in the US, presented this relationship in a positive light advocating for sport to be considered a form of religion in and of itself. Novak supported this view by describing how sport and religion share elements that

are ritualistic, sacrificial and spiritual in nature, highlighting similarities between the two which include sacred times and spaces, emotional investment by devotees, and the potential for each to develop the human spirit.

Deford (1976a, 1976b, 1976c, 1976d), an American sports journalist, approached the subject from an entirely secular perspective. His consideration of the sport-religion interface in the US magazine *Sports Illustrated*, focused on the relationship between elite level sport and evangelical Christianity. Deford suggested that alongside wider changes in the cultural landscape during the 1960s, such as the Civil Rights movement, there was a shift in the relationship between sport and religion with sport proving the more popular activity. Around this time, elite level sports teams began to play on Sundays which impacted the way some people spent time on the Sabbath. For example, rather than attending worship, families began to attend sporting events. Deford (1976a, 1976b, 1976c, 1976d) termed this shift 'the Sunday revolution' which, for him, signified the prevalence of sport in US society, and, in turn, influenced the way in which evangelical Christians incorporated faith into sport. Deford (1976a) advocated for the emergence of new ideology within Christianity which he termed 'sportianity', a broad description of the way in which Christian athletes could comfortably combine the two main facets of their everyday lives. Of course, such an ideology does not come without its problems, one of which is a series of subsequent moral and ethical dilemmas, i.e., that cheating in sport may be seen as acceptable. Aside from evangelism, 'sportianity' failed to impact wider debates within the church such as confronting social issues, inequalities and social justice, or encouraging spiritual renewal. For Deford (1976b), evangelical Christianity had little positive impact on sport and did little to change the way it was played.

Despite their diverse standpoints, these seminal texts provided the groundwork for later literature focusing on the arguments for and against the relationship between sport and religion, the majority of which was written from a broadly Christian perspective and centred on US contexts. From the mid-1970s scholarly work on sport and religion began to appear in academic journals (e.g., Dirksen, 1975; Hoffman, 1976) and as chapters in sports studies textbooks (e.g., Coakley, 1986; Deford, 1979; Eitzen & Sage, 1978). In time, specialised books on sport and Christianity (e.g., Higgs, 1983, 1995; Ladd & Mathisen, 1999) began to emerge as well as edited collections of previously published articles from books and journals or conference papers (e.g., Baum & Coleman, 1989; Hoffman, 1992e; Prebish, 1993b, Price, 2001). These included contributions from various academic disciplines such as history, anthropology and sociology, and from wider professions such as theology, journalism and coaching. Early empirical studies that appeared in journals (e.g., Beller, Stoll, Burwell & Cole, 1996; Dunn & Stevenson, 1998; Kelley, Hoffman & Gill, 1990; Stevenson, 1991; 1997) also evidenced a predominantly North American Christian perspective.

Interest from within religious traditions was slow to develop, a possible reason for this being that theologians are rarely inclined to study sport. Similarly, those who study sport are rarely predisposed to study religion (Coakley, 2016; Treat, 2015, 2018). In more recent times, however, there has been burgeoning interest in the links between sport, spirituality and religion from scholars across a plethora of disciplines and denominations including both monographs (e.g., Alpert, 2015; Baker, 2016; Grano, 2017; Scholes & Sassower, 2013; Trothen, 2019) and edited collections (e.g., Alpert & Remillard, 2019; Hoven, Parker & Watson, 2019; Parry, Robinson, Nesti & Watson,

2007; Schultz & Sheffer, 2016; Shoemaker, 2018). Related contributions have also appeared more regularly in both sports focused academic books (e.g., Jarvie, 2013; Yamane, Mellies & Blake, 2010) and religious academic literature (e.g., Hall, 2009; Mathison, 2005; Price, 2005). This increase has witnessed input on UK contexts (e.g., Ellis, 2014, Harvey, 2014) and from a wider global perspective (e.g., Adogame, Parker & Watson, 2020; McLeod, Justvik, Hess, 2021). As noted by Watson and Parker (2013), such interest has led to the emergence of related publications, academic courses, conferences, seminars and research centres, as well as a range of non-academic print and electronic media.

There has also been an increase in empirical studies of the relationship between sport, spirituality and religion (e.g., Daniels, 2022; Daniels & Parker, 2023; Hoven, 2016; Kretschmann & Benz, 2012b; Schroeder & Scribner, 2006) and of specific areas including prayer (Lee, 2003) and sports chaplaincy (Oliver & Parker, 2019; Roe & Parker, 2016; Fleming & Parker, 2022; King, Parker & Hemmings, 2020; Whitmore, 2021). The past decade has also seen the emergence of specialist journals such as recently re-launched *International Journal of Religion and Sport* and the *Journal of the Christian Society for Kinesiology and Leisure Studies* (CSKLS).

At the wider level, the relationship between sport, spirituality and religion has been explored by scholars from a greater variety of disciplines such as philosophy (Aggerholm, 2016), sports psychology (Hemmings, Watson & Parker, 2019; Ronkainen & Nesti 2018; Czech & Bullet, 2007; Czech, Wrisberg, Fischer, Thompson & Hayes, 2004; Egil & Fisher, 2017; Houltberg, Wang & Schnitker, 2017; Ballard & Wilson, 2017), social justice (Jarvie, Parker & Watson, 2022), politics (Macaloon,

2013; Soltes, 2021; Sarkar, Hill & Parker, 2014), physical and natural science (Grupe, Kurz, & Teipel, 2012) ethics (Parry, Nesti & Watson, 2011; Parsons, 2012; Shafer 2016; Trothen, 2018; Wieting, 2019), and theology (Moore, 2012; Plant, 2012; Preece & Hess, 2009; Stoddart, 2012).

A greater specificity and specialization to the study of sport, spirituality and religion has also emerged in relation to a range of key social variables such as gender (Blazer, 2015), health and well-being (Byl & Visker, 1999), disability (Watson & Parker, 2014, 2020), race and ethnicity (Scholes, 2021; Waller, 2023) and young people (Hoven & Egli, 2019; Metz, 2018; Paprocki, 2013; Parker, White & Meyer, 2023; White, Parker & Meyer, 2023) debating the significance of the connection for them. Related literature has also addressed specific sports such as American football (Bain-Selbo, 2012), baseball (Evans & Herzog, 2002; Price, 2006), basketball (Forney, 2010), parkour (Potter, 2019), skateboarding (O'Connor, 2019), football/soccer (Baines, 2016, Daniels, 2022) and fishing (Houston, 2012).

Throughout this growth in interest in the relationship between sport, spirituality and religion the trend to focus predominantly on the Christian faith has continued. That said, attention has also been drawn to sport's relationship with other faiths such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Shinto (e.g., Alpert, 2015; Coakley, 2016; Magdalinkski & Chandler, 2002; Meyer, 2009). In turn, specialised texts have emerged on the connection between sport and faiths such as Islam (e.g., Benn, Dagkas, & Jawad, 2011; Benn, Pfister, & Jawad, 2012; Testa & Amara, 2015), Buddhism (Boyer, 2009) and Judaism (Greenspoon, 2012).

What the mapping of this literature reveals is that early texts tended to take a somewhat simplistic view of the sport-religion relationship arguing for and against the relationship, but that in more recent times there has been a broadening of interest from a greater variety of academic disciplines and geographical contexts. Although some of this later work has featured (and been based upon) empirical evidence, such studies have significantly lagged behind theoretical contributions and there remains a noticeable gap in that arising from empirical research (Watson & Parker, 2014). Having spent time considering the wider literature on sport, spirituality and religion, the chapter now moves to explore in greater depth scholarly work concerning the specific relationship between sport and Christianity.

Sport and Religion

The strong links between sport and religion in many societies has led to the suggestion that they have become so entwined that the connection goes unnoticed (Schultz & Scheffer, 2016). Much of the early literature, coming primarily from the disciplines of anthropology and history, looked to reveal the reasons for this relationship. It highlights how athletic pursuits, such as running, jumping, throwing, wrestling and ball games, originated as religious rites whereby humans sought to harness divine power to help gain success over their enemies and a fruitful harvest (e.g., Baker, 1988, 2007, 2010; Brasch, 1970; Guttmann, 1978, 1988). Scholars highlight the link between sport and religious belief in primitive societies by drawing attention to activities such as the games of the Native Americans (e.g., Golden, 1998), the races of the Jicarilla Apache (e.g., Guttmann, 1978, 2004), the ball games of the Aztec and Mayans (e.g., Yamane, Mellies & Blake, 2010) and the stick ball games of the Cherokees (e.g., Baker, 2007). This connection between sport and religion was not confined to America and the

literature reveals the ritualised wrestling of parts of the Sudan, Egypt and Nigeria (Baker, 1988) and the ritualised games of societies in New Mexico and Nigeria, as well as by some Innuits (Eitzen & Sage, 1993). The historical links in various parts of the world has led to the suggestion that there was a vague distinction, if indeed one existed at all, between sport and religious belief (Harvey, 2014). Sport and religious ritual became so entwined there was almost no distinction between the two and sporting activities seldom warranted their own terms.

This literature provided the foundation for those with a specific interest in the sport-religion interface and which led to the identification of a relationship that has changed with time (e.g., Ellis, 2014; Harvey 2014; Soltes, 2021; Watson, 2007a; Watson & Parker, 2013). Attention is given to the games of the Ancient Greeks, a culture shaped significantly by mythology and pervaded with religious ritual (Delaney & Madigan, 2021). These games included religious services, prayers and sacrifices and which were participated in to gain favour with, and honour, some form of deity. There were numerous religious-athletics festivals which were sacred in nature, as were the time and place in which they took place. The link between sport and worship not only existed for competitors but also for spectators who saw no distinction between the two (see, Baker, 2007; Guttmann, 1978/2004; Hoffman, 2010). As with the Ancient Greeks, Roman sport appeared to have largely emerged from religious festivals (Ellis, 2014). They too were deeply religious people believing in many gods and both sport and religion figured prominently in their society (Harvey, 2014). That said, the Roman perspective on sport was quite different to their Greek predecessors with sport being viewed as entertainment and a preparation for military service (Delaney & Madigan, 2021). Prisoners of war, slaves and the more disadvantaged in society were forced to

fight to the death (Hoffman, 2010). This led to the gladiatorial battles which began sport's move away from the realm of religion.

Sport continued its move from its religious origins with the birth of Christianity (Harvey, 2014; Hoffman, 2010). The church fathers proclaimed Greco-Roman sport to be incompatible with the Christian faith. However, it proved difficult to suppress and some Christians still attended the public sporting events (Ellis, 2014). The literature focussing on this period draws attention to Paul's use of sporting analogies in his teachings and writings (see Pfitzner, 2012). Although he did not openly promote sport, Paul used many references to the sporting world in his letters (Ellis, 2014), metaphors which are often used by modern day athletes (Hoffman, 2010). As Roman Catholicism took hold and began to dominate its emphasis on the spiritual rather than the physical led to a further division between sport and Christianity. The negative attitude to sport continued with Protestantism in the 16th century and the influence of the Puritans who believed that God was best served through work. The end of the nineteenth century brought "muscular" Christianity and a shift back towards a more compatible relationship. This movement promoted the belief that sport encouraged Christian morality, physical fitness and masculinity, and a powerful bond was established (Watson, 2007a)

Today sport has become a secular activity and a dominant cultural form (e.g., Blazer, 2012; Price, 2001; Scholes & Sassower, 2013). This has not prevented scholars, particular in North America, continuing to debate the seemingly deeply embedded relationship (e.g., Hoffman 1992f; Novak, 1967/1994; Prebish 1993a; Price, 1992, 2001). Different perspectives have thus been proposed as to whether sport can be

considered a religion. Significant to this is the definition of religion (Hoffman, 2010) and which is a subject of discussion (e.g., Higgs & Braswell, 2004; Magdalinski & Chandler, 2002; Prebish, 1993b). These definitions range from those generally adopted by sociologists, who look at the function of religion in society (e.g., Coakley, 2016), to those of theologians who look to its content and reference to a greater power (e.g., Prebish, 1993a). The literature reveals a range of perspectives on whether sport fits with a definition of a religion.

The arguments against sport fitting with such a definition focus on the differences between their respective characteristics (e.g., Chandler, 1992; Coakley, 2016; Higgs 1992; Higgs & Braswell, 2004; Magdalinski & Chandler, 2002). These centre on the differing essence of sport and religion and the contrast in their fundamental character and truths. The claim being that the essential characteristic of religion comes from the divine whilst that of sport comes from human nature. This view acknowledges how each includes elements such as beliefs, meanings, rituals and events but advocates how those of religion are fundamentally mystical, focusing on the sacred and supernatural, whilst those of sport focus on the profane and the present.

The suggestion that sport fits with a definition of a religion in every sense advocate that the elements of sport, like those of traditional religion, do have the potential to bring the same ultimate experience (e.g., Aitken, 1993; Prebish, 1993a). Focus is directed towards the shared similar characteristics of sport and religion, most of which tend to be structural (e.g., Edwards, 1973; Eitzen & Sage, 1993; Novak, 1988, 1992, 1993; Prebish, 1993a; Price, 1992; 2001). These include the fact that each have their own hierarchies, places of worship, rituals, and seasonal festivals and events. There

is some attention given to the outcomes of the two disciplines such as both: seek improvement of body, mind and spirit; help individuals better themselves; can be a source of deep personal meaning; can result in an emotional commitment; provide experiences which can cause individuals to transcend their own boundaries; and present opportunities for emotional highs (e.g. Coakley, 2016; Hoffman, 1992f; Slusher, 1993).

A third alternative perspective acknowledges many of the shared similarities of sport and religion but is less certain of a sacred or supernatural nature to sport. It promotes the notion that sport is similar, rather than identical, to a religion in character and structure but considers it a more worldly pursuit (e.g., Edwards, 1973; Mathisen, 1992; Novak, 1967/1994; Price, 1992, 2001). In recognising its similarities, yet still reluctant to label sport a religion, scholars have proposed a plethora of terms as to define its religious nature, for example, ‘civil religion’ (Butterworth, 2008; Guttman, 1988; Loy, McPherson and Kenyon, 1978), ‘cultural religion’ (Albanese, 1981), ‘folk religion’ (Mathisen, 1992), ‘popular religion’ (Price, 2001; Trothen, 2006), ‘natural religion’ (Novak, 1967/1994), ‘quasi-religion’ (Dunning, 1986; Edwards, 1973), ‘religious phenomena’ (Bain-Selbo & Sapp, 2016), ‘secular religion’ (Alomes, 1994; Liponski, 2009) and ‘surrogate religion’ (Percy & Taylor, 1997; Coles, 1975).

The proposed structural similarities, including that of ritual, were the focus of some of the initial literature (e.g., Eitzen & Sage, 1978, 1993; Hoffman, 1992d; Prebish, 1993a; McCallum, 1992; Womack, 1992). Rituals play an important and prominent part in both sport and religion. The human need for rituals, once fulfilled through religious beliefs, is now suggested to be met through sport. The rituals of religion and sport are

each intended to bind the performer to both the activity and other participants, as well as bring meaning for those involved (Slusher, 1993). These rituals, often referred to as magico-religious practices, can be used to alleviate anxieties in sport. They are not believed to make up for a lack of skill, but athletes do believe they assist them.

Although both magic and religion seek to draw on supernatural powers, there are suggested to be identifiable differences. Religion is concerned with the 'holy', performed as an end in and of itself and seeks to bind communities, whereas magic is more self-centred and is used as a tool geared towards practical, instantaneous outcomes (Coakley, 2016; Eitzen & Sage, 1993; Hoffman, 1992d). In his early anthropological work, Malinowski (2004) argues that magical practices surface in activities with a large degree of chance but do not exist where the outcome is reliable and certain. Eitzen and Sage (1993) applied Malinowski's theory to the uncertain world of sporting competition and suggest that athletes and coaches employ magic to bring them luck. Eitzen and Sage (1993) go on to highlight the work of Gmelch (1971) who applied Malinowski's theory to baseball. Gmelch (1971) found that activities with high degrees of uncertainty such as hitting, pitching, shooting and throwing are more likely to cause individuals to use magical practices than the less risky activity of fielding.

It is the magico-religious practice of prayer that is amongst the most frequently used in sport (Eitzen & Sage, 1993; Leonard, 1998; Willett, Goldfine, Seidler, Gillentine & Marley, 2014). That said, Eitzen & Sage (1993) suggest, that given its primarily private nature, that both the extent and the content of prayer is difficult to determine. Hochstelter (2009) suggests that although it is a mystery as to how prayer works,

people continue to pray. With specific reference to sporting practice, Prebish (1993a) claims that whilst athletes may not be certain if prayer helps, they may not take the chance of leaving it out. With the literature indicating prayer to be a regular practice for athletes, the chapter now considers its use in greater depth.

The Use of Prayer in Sport

Much of the initial consideration of the use of prayer in sport emanates from a sociological perspective (see, for example, Eitzen & Sage, 1993; Coakley, 1986). Coakley (2016) suggests the existing anecdotal evidence implies that athletes utilize prayer for a number of possible reasons: as a mechanism for coping with uncertain stressful situations; to help maintain moral standards; to establish meaning to sporting participation; to achieve a balanced perspective regarding sport; to develop strong relationships with teammates; to conform to rules and expectations; to establish an identity beyond the controls of sport; and to achieve success. Coakley (2016) goes on to suggest that some athletes may even use prayer in an attempt to achieve success, believing God intervenes in all areas of life including sport, and which is justified on the basis that with success comes a better platform for witness. However, there is an inherent conflict as to whether it is appropriate to pray for success, particularly in activities such as boxing, which includes physical violence.

It was also from a sociological perspective that Aicinena (2017) considers the use of prayer in sport. He identifies sport as an implicit religion which brings secular meaning to human lives. Akin to explicit religions, for Aicinena (2017), sport also brings a sense of belonging, reinforces values and is awash with rituals and traditions. He suggests that rather than focusing on what God wants for their lives, athletes' prayers are more

often directed towards receiving something from God such as a sense of calm, success or an enhancement of performance. He determines that prayers that focus on such secular matters to be inappropriate. Furthermore, Aicinena (2017) highlights how the Lord's Prayer is recited by not only Christians, but also agnostics and atheists as a part of pre-game and post-game routines in American sport. He observes a similar practice over a 21-year period by his collegiate volleyball team. These observations lead Aicinena (2017) to suggest that prayers in sport are not sincere Christian prayers but prayers that are directed to the secular god of success and it is sport rather than God that is glorified.

With the literature viewed through a sociological lens highlighting, and questioning, the use of prayers for success, Kreider (2003) broaches the matter from a philosophical perspective. He suggests that prayers for assistance in sport are unsporting, regardless as to whether they are answered or not, as they request the help of a non-participant to gain advantage over other athletes. In asking for such help athletes show a willingness to seek an unfair advantage, which Kreider (2003) indicates is an attempt to cheat, a behaviour typical of unsporting behaviour. He reasons that other types of prayer related to sport are also inappropriate. These include thankfulness prayers, with Kreider (2002) deeming it inappropriate to thank someone for giving them an unfair advantage. Furthermore, he notes how prayers for assistance can be defended by athletes on the basis that their success demonstrates God's power and in doing so they witness to and glorify God. If the goal of such prayers is to bring others to God, Kreider (2003) advocates it is this, rather than personal success as a means to achieving this aim, that should be the focus of athletes' prayers.

With a growing interest in its value in reducing stress and anxiety, the use of prayer in sport is considered by sports psychologists. On reviewing this literature, Watson and Czech (2005) identify three main reasons why Christian athletes might use prayer in sport, namely: (i) to cope with the uncertainties and anxieties, (ii) to put sport and life into perspective, and (iii) to provide meaning to participation in competitive sport. They advocate the need for an understanding of the role of religion and spirituality in athletes' lives by sport psychology consultants, concluding that this could serve to strengthen the relationship between the athlete and the consultant, and which may bring with it the potential for enhanced performance, a call which has subsequently been endorsed by Sarkar et al. (2014) and Hemmings et al. (2019).

Further considerations from a psychological perspective come from Hochstetler (2009), who highlights the tensions that exist in the relationship between sport and prayer. These include the tendency for prayers in sport to favour the self over others, that sport is not a worthy subject for prayer, the extent to which God would intervene in a trivial aspect of life such as sport and how such prayers are interpreted by others. The intention behind this consideration is to offer recommendations for the use of prayer in sport based on spiritual maturity. Hochstetler (2009) advocates that such prayers should be offered with humility and seek an alignment with God's purpose rather than on manipulating events or used as a magical request. Prayers should focus on the breadth of life and sport and include aspects such as winning, losing, friendships made through sport and the striving involved. He suggests that the search for fellowship with God necessitates occasions of prayer which should include times of reflection, meditation, silence and listening. It is the broader holistic development, from a physiological, emotional, intellectual and spiritual perspective, provided by

religious rituals that Maranise (2013) argues for religious rituals being of greater benefit to athletes than when used as a superstitious practice. Furthermore, he advocates that the many positive benefits of religious rituals can bring significant meaning to athletes' lives.

Turning to the literature on the sport-Christianity interface, Price (2009) and Hoffman (2011) deliberations on the nature, purpose and occasions of prayer, are suggested to be, given the restricted empirical research, the most informative studies on the use of prayer in sport (Watson & Parker, 2014). Price (2009) focuses on the relationship between sport and prayer in the US, and highlights a culture where prayer is very much a part of the sporting environment and a regular practice for not only teams and individuals, but also fans and priests who offer invocations. He outlines the types of prayers used by athletes and teams before, during and after sporting events and their intended purpose. Price (2009) suggests prior to games team prayers have a tendency to focus on divine protection and fair play and serve to bring a sense of calm which allows players to maximise their potential whilst also generating team unity. During a sporting event he claims prayers tend to be requests for athletes to perform to their best and have the necessary skills to be successful. However, there are also prayers of gratitude at this time which can take the form of symbolic gestures such as pointing to the heavens. According to Price (2009), post-game team prayers tend to focus on thanksgiving for sporting opportunities and which help to put sport and its outcomes into better perspective. Finally, he proposes, given both activities can transform, refresh, sustain and nurture the spirit in times of stress and anxiety, a convergence of sport and prayer where the act of praying can become an act of playing and the act of playing can be an act of prayer.

For Hoffman (2011), the use of prayer in sport has been on the rise in the US in recent years to such an extent that it is a regular and accepted feature of the pre- and post-game rituals for teams at professional, college, high school and youth level and is no longer considered a novelty. He highlights the value of these prayers in strengthening team bonds, reducing pre-game anxiety but also as a means of controlling the lifestyles of athletes who may hinder the teams' performance. Hoffman (2011) suggests these prayers are supplemented by private prayers by individual athletes, prayerful invocations over the public address system and prayerful gestures during sporting events. Having outlined the convergence of prayer within elite sport by evangelical athletes, Hoffman (2011) raises issues around the relationship between prayer and sport. He likens the use of pre-game prayer by coaches to war cries to ready athletes for competition and suggests a degree of hypocrisy in that such piety is seldom matched with regular attendance at church. Hoffman (2011) goes on to highlight the fact that prayers in sport focus on an environment based on play, and therefore an illusionary one, rather than the more pressing aspects of life and questions the extent to which God cares about such things. In explaining how prayers for safety can be used as a psychological tool by athletes who compete in sports which come with a high risk of injury, he questions whether athletes should make such requests given they are electing to put themselves in danger.

Hoffman (2011) also debates the contentious issue of praying to win indicating that many coaches and athletes, despite the theological incongruities with the practice, have little difficulty in praying to this effect. He argues such prayers, framed within the competitive worldview of winning, overlook the possibility that sport is about more than

the result and includes the adventures and experiences, that God may take far greater interest in, that come from participation in sport. He further suggests that when prayer is performed mechanically and routinely for a specific purpose it has the potential to become a magical practice. Hoffman (2011) concludes by suggesting that, for evangelicals in elite US sport, prayer is organised around their own needs and that of evangelism but could be put to better use by focusing on restoring sport to its intended purpose.

Although providing insight into the relationship between prayer and sport, these studies by Price (2009) and Hoffman (2011) both focus solely on US elite sport, an environment dominated by evangelical Christianity, with much of the discussion drawn from anecdotal evidence and so limit their potential to speak to other countries and contexts. However, these limitations accepted these secondary source commentaries, arguably come closest to highlighting the complexities of the use of prayer in sport by Christian athletes in contemporary society. As such, there is a need to return to the discipline of sports psychology to identify further empirical research on the experiences of Christian athletes and their use of prayer in sport. Adopting an existential-phenomenological approach, Czech et al. (2004) addressed the primary research question: 'What is the lived experience of Christian athletes when they pray before, during, or after an athletic event?' Czech et al. (2004) interviewed nine former NCAA Division I Christian Athletes, from either Athletes in Action, Fellowship of Christian Athletes or various Christian church groups. Findings highlight the use of prayer as a positive mental practice to reduce stress and anxiety. A further exploratory study by Czech and Bullet (2007) investigated 19 NCAA Division II collegiate athletes' perceptions of Christian prayer in sport. Their data, gathered through surveys,

personal interviews and observations during athlete prayer meetings reveal prayer is used primarily to cope with uncertainty and keep sport in perspective whilst also helping to reduce stress and improve concentration.

Similar findings are identified by Vernacchia, McGuire, Reardon and Templin (2000), who in researching the psychosocial characteristics of track and field athletes, interviewed 15 Olympians. They identify the utilization of prayer to not only cope with stress and anxiety but also as a tool in striving for peak performance and to bring meaning to athletes' participation. It is the use of prayer, along with a belief and confidence in God and the role of scripture, that Ballard and Wilson (2017) highlight as playing a part in how spirituality can enhance sporting performance. They conducted semi-structured interviews with 3 elite athletes, 2 American males and 1 British female. These athletes were asked 'What role does prayer play in your life?' Ballard and Wilson (2017) demonstrate how prayer is used in different ways by these athletes to help alleviate stress and anxiety, to ask for good health, for the ability to perform and to give thanks to God. Ballard and Wilson (2017) identify that prayer plays a part in providing social support to athletes and enhances team cohesion. Furthermore, prayer contributes to athletes' emotional intelligence by helping them control their emotions whilst competing. With the exception of the study by Ballard and Wilson (2017), who include a single British athlete, much of this empirical research is again confined to America and therefore is only able to provide a limited perspective on the use of prayer in sport. Park (2000) offers some breadth to the existing research by providing insight from beyond this culture. He examines the coping strategies used, both presently and in the past, by Korean national athletes. Using a qualitative methodology, Park (2000) interviewed 180 athletes drawn from 41 different sports.

Having analysed the gathered data, he identifies seven themes to the strategies the Korean athletes employ to help them deal with the stress of competitive sport. Alongside the psychological training, training and strategies, somatic relaxation, hobby activities, social support and substance use, prayer is also identified as an approach adopted by the respondents. The Korean athletes used prayer to appeal for divine intervention, inspiration or support and turned to this religious practice to feel at peace.

Beyond the sport/Christianity interface, Czech et al. (2004) and Czech and Bullet (2007) studies provide further insight into the use of prayer in sport from the perspective of sports psychology. Czech et al. (2004) identify four themes to the athletes' experiences of prayer in sport. They note how a 'Prayer routine' is seldom deviated from and athletes have specific rituals prior to, during, and after practice and competition. 'Thankfulness' prayers result in athletes giving thanks for their skills, performances and being able to participate. The theme of 'God's will' shows that the majority of the respondents believe their abilities and the outcome of their performances are influenced by God's will. Prayers intended to reduce stress and anxiety are included in the theme 'Performance related prayers'. This theme also includes prayers for their own and their fellow participants' safety as well as requests to perform to their best and which gives them the purpose of playing for God. They note that athletes did not pray for victory.

Similarly, Czech and Burke (2007) reveal the focus of the athletes' prayers are not for victory but for safety, to play one's best and to give glory to God. Additional findings indicate a belief that praying teams have an advantage over those that do not, for example: praying teams may not necessarily be more successful than non-praying

teams, although they may be less stressed and more focused; Christian beliefs do not influence attributes such as competitiveness, aggression and trying to win-at-all-costs; female athletes support religious rituals and prayer more than males; and many athletes feel professional Christian athletes do not display their faith in their actions and consequently feel such athletes are hypocritical. They conclude support for the hypotheses: athletes feel prayer helps their performance; prayer is used before rather than after performance; and the importance of prayer is dictated by the importance of the competition. The studies by Czech et al. (2004) and Czech and Bullet (2007) in the field of sports psychology provide deeper insight and understanding into the use of prayer in sport. Furthermore, by drawing on the experiences Christian athletes they contribute empirical evidence to the debates. Similar empirical research within the sport-Christianity interface would serve to further enhance understanding of the use of prayer in sport.

Beyond the sports psychology literature many of these findings are mirrored in Lee's (2003) study of the use of prayer in sport. Rather than considering athlete perspectives, Lee (2003) considers the perceptions of coaches regarding the use of prayer and in a particular context, that of US school sport. The use of prayer in sport at this level is a contentious issue (Lee, 2005; Miller, Lee & Martin, 2013; Sawyer, 1997). The collection, analysis and interpretation of the data gleaned from interviewing secondary school coaches identifies that prayer concerns and requests are mostly used for the safety of the athletes themselves and their opponents, for a good performance, for concerns regarding travel and to participate with a good attitude and behaviour. Lee (2003) too notes how prayer helps to build team unity, deal with

the uncertainties of sport and to keep traditions (see also, Murray, Joyner, Burke, Wilson & Zwald, 2005).

To summarise, what is continually evident in the literature into the use of prayer in sport is an overreliance on input from North America desk-based studies to glean any understanding of the issues at play. To confirm the proposals of the existing theoretical literature there has been the need to turn to empirical evidence from other disciplines, most notably sports psychology. Consequently, at this time, the existing evidence appears limited, any understanding being restricted almost entirely to a particular culture and one which needs to draw on findings from other disciplines. This highlights the need for research beyond these boundaries and ideally from a perspective which focuses on the sport-Christianity interface. This has the potential to both broaden but also enhance insight into the use of prayer in sport. Having highlighted how sport has become primarily a secular activity, albeit one that shares similar characteristics to its religious roots, consideration now moves to the place of religion within the culture of sport.

Sport, Religion and Culture

In recent times, sport and religion have experienced contrasting fortunes in popularity in the West and whilst there has been a considerable growth in interest in sport, the reverse has been true for religion (Brierley, 2006; Gill, 2003). There has been a change in how people spend their Sundays, the day considered the Sabbath for Christians and the day traditionally set aside for Christian worship. The undertaking of secular activities on the Sabbath, which in the past would have been frowned upon,

has become commonplace (Ellis, 2014) and evidence has shown that attendance at church on a Sunday has been negatively impacted by sporting activities (e.g., Cragun, Stinespring & Tillman, 2019; Briggs, 2013; McMullin, 2012). Furthermore, it has been claimed that in both the US (Beneke & Remeillard, 2014) and UK (Ellis, 2014) there is a direct correlation between the decline of traditional religion and the rise in devotion to sport.

The significance sport has come to play in society is examined by Ellis (2012) with consideration of whether sport may be taking over some of the functions previously served by religion. He conducted empirical research with both spectators and participants in the UK and USA to understand the meaning and importance individuals attach to sport. This involved the distribution of a questionnaire to participants and spectators from a range of sports and to which he received 468 responses. The survey provided data covering five broad areas, namely: (i) the significance of sport in people's lives and the extent to which it influenced their arrangement of other commitments; (ii) their motivations in playing and spectating and the significance of a team or club; (iii) the relationship between playing or watching to character; (iv) aesthetics and routine, and (v) the impact of winning and losing. Ellis (2012) suggests that sport serves several functions which may include giving meaning to peoples' lives, providing a sense of identity, a way of connecting with others, an opportunity for an appreciation of the aesthetic, influencing or demonstrating character and an escape from social constraints. He goes further to suggest that, based on the factors highlighted, sport may come close to worship and bring opportunities for transcendence. This leads him to propose that certain functions, originally served by religious belief, have now been taken over by sport.

In later work, Ellis (2014) also focuses on the changing nature of the relationship between sport and religion, focusing on Christianity. He debates the coincidence that at the time of the 1851 census, when church attendance appeared to be in decline, the reverse was true of sport. He points to three major factors that have contributed to the present-day situation in the UK. The first of these is the expansion of television scheduling which, in recent years, has resulted in the screening of programmes on Sunday morning which have the potential to take children away from Sunday school. Television was also behind the second factor. The birth of the Premier League in 1992 meant that football matches were shown regularly on a Sunday along with other major sporting events. It was the relaxation of UK Sunday trading laws in 1994, which allowed all shops to open, which Ellis (2014) identifies as the third factor. He suggests that this has resulted in sport, once excluded from Sundays, now dominating the public psyche whilst the church struggles to remain relevant. Sunday sport, frowned on in the past by church leaders, receives little condemnation and it is not uncommon for it to be embraced, particularly where there is potential for outreach. It is from these observations, along with findings from further qualitative work, that Ellis (2014) advocates how Sunday, which was exclusively the domain of religion has undergone a cultural change. Despite sport's apparent separation from its religious roots and its growth in popularity there is still appreciation of the relationship as it exists today, much of which points to the benefits the relationship affords both parties (e.g., Aitken, 1993; Eitzen & Sage, 1993; Hoffman, 1992d, 2010, 2013; Prebish, 1993a).

The literature suggests that it is the use of Christianity by sport and its athletes that helps to establish links between sport and the Christian faith (e.g., Coakley, 2016;

Eitzen & Sage, 1993; Hoffman, 1992c, 1992d, 2010; Price, 2001). Some athletes take an interest in Christianity as they believe they will get ahead with God on their side and may attribute improvements in their skills to their beliefs (Prebish, 1993a). Sport being a self-focused and self-indulgent activity can cause athletes to experience a crisis of meaning. Some athletes overcome this by viewing sport as an opportunity to perform to the glory of God, as an act of worship and/or an opportunity to share their faith. This can bring the belief that sport is part of God's plan for their lives and therefore of ultimate meaning, a perspective that brings a commitment to improving and perfecting skills. It is faith rather than sport that defines these athletes' lives and enables them to maintain a balanced perspective towards their sport (Hoffman 1992c). It is not just athletes that use Christianity to aid their sport, coaches also recognise its value in helping athletes avoid the risky lifestyles which can come with some sports and so help athletes stay focused on their training. Coaches may also use Christianity to encourage team unity (Eitzen & Sage, 1993).

There is evidence of the value Christian belief plays in helping athletes deal with the emotions and pressures of sport from research into the role of the sports chaplain. The early literature in this area centred on the experiences of sports chaplains, primarily in professional football (e.g., Boyers, 2012, 2000; Heskins & Baker, 2006; Wood, 2011) but more recently from professional cricket (e.g., Hemmings & Chawner, 2019). That said, this area has seen a growth in academic interest from across the globe (e.g., Parker, Watson & White, 2016; Whitmore, 2021). There has been analysis of the value of role in both the USA (e.g., Dzikus, Waller & Hardin, 2010; Lixey, Hübenthal, Mieth & Müller, 2012; Waller, Huffman & Hardin, 2016) and the UK (e.g., Daniels & Parker, 2023; Gamble, Hill & Parker, 2013; Jones, Parker & Daniels, 2020;

Whitmore & Parker, 2020, 2023). This interest has been reflected in the emergence of empirical research which has indicated the potential for the role of the sports' chaplain to benefit athletes' emotional well-being.

Small-scale qualitative research has been carried out by King, Parker and Hemmings (2020) and Fleming and Parker (2022) into elite level women's football. Both studies examine how sports chaplaincy might assist in providing player support. King, Parker and Hemmings' (2020) attention focuses on the emotional wellbeing of seven international women soccer players aged 18 to 29 on a residential training camp whilst Fleming and Parker's (2022) study focus on Scottish footballers. These studies demonstrate the way in which chaplaincy support has the potential to contribute significantly to the well-being of elite footballers and as such these studies extend the evidence as to the emotional support athletes gain from religion in sport, an otherwise unexplored issue. Although once again confined to professional football, Roe and Parker (2016) examine the role of the sports chaplain in the holistic development of players, and Oliver and Parker (2019) investigate the extent to which sports chaplains might contribute meaningfully towards the safeguarding and wider welfare support of elite youth footballers. These studies provide a useful starting point for work in this area and there is now a need for research into other sports and ability levels.

As well as athletes utilizing their beliefs to help them when competing, the reverse is also the case with Christianity utilizing sport to its own ends (e.g., Hoffman, 1992d, 2010, 2013). This literature indicates that sport is used by Christianity within different institutions in society and by doing so is helping to develop the relationship. This is the case with Christian para-church sports organisations which endorse the belief that

sporting activities can promote spiritual growth and are used to promote moral character. This approach has its roots in muscular Christianity, an ideology first evident in Victorian England which promoted the belief that sport and physical education had the potential to develop characteristics such as self-respect, emotional and physical strength, perseverance, discipline, loyalty and cooperation (Watson, 2007a).

This ideology has been the subject of extensive study in areas such as history (e.g., Carter, 1984; Huggins, 2004; Koehlinger, 2017) and sociology (e.g., Birley, 1993; Dunning & Sheard, 1979/2005). Despite emerging in the Victorian era, the influence and evolution of the movement continues and its impact is studied from a host of perspectives including gender (e.g., Delap & Morgan, 2013; Deardorff & Deardorff, 2008; Putney, 2001b), British colonialism (e.g., Macaloon, 2013; Malcolm, 2013), Catholicism (e.g., Chandler, 2002; Costantini & Lixey, 2011; McDevitt, 1997) and other faiths (e.g., Presner, 2007; Meyer, 2009; Smith 2002; Alter, 2004) to cite but few of many instances. The muscular Christianity ideology has been continued by Christian sports organisations in both the US (e.g., Hoffman, 2010; Krattenmaker, 2010; Ladd & Mathisen, 1999; Putney, 2001a) and the UK (e.g., Erdozain, 2010; Hall, 1994; Mangan, 1981/2000; Vance, 1985; Watson, Weir & Friend, 2005) who have adopted the value of sport in developing spiritual growth and moral character, a perspective further promoted by the use and exegesis of Paul's athletic metaphors in the Bible. The contrasting belief that Christian organisations are merely using sport for their own ends is fuelled by suggestions that Christian organisations make little attempt to influence the morality or tackle the more controversial issues associated with sport (Aitken, 1993; Ballantine, 1988; Eitzen & Sage, 1993; Prebish, 1993a). Subsequently,

there is a call for more attention to be paid to a theology which is less focused on material and utilitarian outcomes and more on how, and the spirit in which, sport is played (Hoffman, 2010; Watson, 2007a).

The use of sport by Christianity goes beyond sporting organisations extending to the church itself (e.g., Magdalinski & Chandler, 2002; Prebish, 1993a). This institution recognises the success of sport and so may seek both to copy sport, in the way it promotes itself, and align itself with sport which is so popular with the public. The opposition of the past has been replaced with a recognition of sports' potential in helping to promote health, morality and character. Churches in the US provide sporting and recreational activities for all ages. These activities help to develop fellowship amongst its members and provide an environment which reinforces Christian beliefs. Church promoted sports activities also seek to reach out to the local communities and so increase church membership (Prebish, 1993a). Sport has also been used as an avenue to attract men to the church, an environment in which women are traditionally more comfortable with its teachings, by exalting its virtues for building character and self-discipline (Flake, 1992; Randels & Beal, 2002). The extent to which the church is prepared to use sport in its ministry has resulted in whole books being dedicated to the subject (e.g., Mason, 2003). Both the church and Christian sports organisations recognise the value of sport as a tool for evangelism and it is the use of sport to spread the Christian message that the discussion moves to consider.

Evangelism in Sport

It is the popularity of sport that Christian sports organisations and the church seek to exploit in their attempts to share their Christian faith and promote their beliefs (e.g.,

Arnold, 2012; Hoffman, 2013; Null, 2008, Pfitzner, 1967, 2013; White, 2012). To achieve this end, they look to recruit members who are then used to promote the organisation by evangelising, distributing materials and witnessing at sporting events, including the major ones such as the Olympic Games. It is the use of elite athletes to spread the Christian message both within sport and wider society that was identified by Deford (1976d) as central to the ideology of 'sportianity'. He, along with Hoffman (2010) and Krattenmaker (2010), liken the language used by evangelical Christians to that used in business in the selling of products. As well as serving the needs of Christianity with the sharing of the Christian message, there are also benefits for the athletes themselves in the opportunity it provides for them to combine their Christian worldview and sport. Hoffman (1976) explains how the modern day 'athletae Dei', the athletes of God, seek to understand their sporting experiences in the context of the doctrines of their Christian beliefs. The theology of the modern 'athletae Dei' is based around the principles of the authority of the Scriptures, a personal faith in Jesus and Christ's commission to spread the gospel. According to Hoffman (1976, 1992a, 1992b) the integration of the theology of the 'athletae Dei' and their sport causes athletes to take an ascetic approach to training, 'ascesis' being the term originally used by Plato and Aristotle in reference to the discipline of athletic training. The intention of this disciplined approach being a performance when competing that glorifies God.

Aitken (1993) identified similar priorities in his study of the US Christian Sports Organisations 'Athletes in Action' and the 'Fellowship of Christian Athletes'. Athletes, particularly successful ones, explain the significance of their involvement in sport with respect to their Christian beliefs and so spread the gospel. Although the emphasis is on effort, there are benefits to winning which include a greater potential for evangelism.

This evangelism can also be aided by the fact that these athletes can also serve as role models especially with the young, who aspire to be like them (Aitken, 1993; Hoffman, 1992a). Success also brings credibility to the message the athlete is trying to deliver.

Hoffman (1976) suggests that with the belief that they are competing for God, and therefore representing God, athletes feel the responsibility to magnify him through victory or conversely face the prospect of devaluing God's name should they lose. He claims that when athletes are successful there is the constant tendency for them to give God the credit for their success which brings glory to God. However, when the athletes experience defeat it is difficult to see how such outcomes can glorify God. Consequently, Hoffman (1976) claims athletes tend to adopt different interpretations and explanations to defeat including a lack of effort on their part, the outcome being God ordered or that God is teaching them a particular lesson. Hoffman (1992a) also cites examples as to how athletes, if they believe success to be important theologically, can come to believe that praying for success is acceptable. Treat (2015; 2018) advocates that when sport is used in this way, it is only perceived to have instrumental value, but suggests this is understandable in cultures in the West where value is attached to utility and activities are only meaningful if they are in some way productive.

In drawing on the seminal work of Niebuhr (1951), in considering how the Christian message has been portrayed and understood from the viewpoint of different cultures, Null (2008) analyses the practices of Christian sports organisations in their attempts to link elite sport and faith. He argues that such organisations place extra pressure on athletes to be successful and so attain the right to announce the Christian message.

The reasoning behind this being that athletes require a level of performance to provide them with the opportunity to evangelise and thereby serve God. Null (2008) argues that this reflects a 'driven' perspective in that redemption is earned through sporting performance. For Null (2008), a 'called' perspective sees redemption as being received as gift through God's love and it is this perspective which encourages a healthier personal identity. Null (2008) advocates that it is the 'driven' perspective that aligns with the culture of elite sport and one that tends to be subscribed to by elite Christian athletes. This leads to identity construction being attached to performance, rather than being grounded in God and it is this performance-based identity that is critiqued by Jones, Parker and Daniels (2020) in their consideration of how sports chaplains might best assist elite athletes in their faith and identity development. They suggest a need to break down the long-standing link, often encouraged by Christian sports organisations, that being successful in sport provides a platform for evangelism. They believe this would help athletes negotiate the demands and expectations of elite sport whose values often contrast with those of Christianity. Athletes can come to see their worth as Christians being attached to sporting success and with it comes added stress and anxiety. Jones, Parker and Daniels (2020) argue that in understanding this relationship, and by taking steps to disassemble it, chaplains can better serve Christian athletes and their well-being (see also, Daniels & Parker, 2023).

Having considered the existing evidence, Coakley (2016) hypothesises that it is by utilizing their prominence and popularity at the elite level to promote their faith that helps successful athletes evade any contentious issues they encounter between faith and sport. Hoffman (1992a) shares this view. Although it seems that to date this hypothesis has yet to be tested, some evidence of this is provided by Stevenson (1991,

1997), who conducted in-depth interviews with 31 elite athletes (23 males and eight females) associated with Athletes-in-Action, an evangelical organization in Western Canada. The data from which appeared to result in two pieces of research both of which identified the use of sport to share the Christian faith. Indeed, the athletes had turned, or returned, to evangelical Christianity to deal with the difficulties they encountered in elite sport.

In the first of these studies Stevenson (1991), having recognised an apparent incongruity in the roles of Christian and sportsperson, noted that such athletes existed. This caused him to examine the ways in which elite Christian athletes juxtapose the two roles of Christian and athlete. He suggested that initial findings indicated that most athletes in his study did not seem to experience any conflict between faith and sport. However, there seemed to be a marked variability in the types of behaviour considered appropriate and Stevenson (1991) identified three different approaches to accommodating the role of Christian athlete. The ‘segregated’ athlete, whether by choice or ignorance, kept the roles separate. Although the ‘selective’ athletes viewed Christian values as secondary to sporting values, it was this group who he identified as using their sport to witness to their faith, which they endeavoured to do by behaving in a Christian manner, keeping to the rules of the game and competing with an appropriate attitude. This group also used their faith to help them deal with the pressure and fluctuating emotions that came with sport. The ‘committed’ athletes viewed Christianity as the prime influence in all areas of their life and refused to see sport and its values as an isolated domain.

Stevenson's (1991) analysis led him to suggest that the three types of role-identity accommodation appeared to correspond, very approximately, to the athletes' level of understanding of their Christian faith. This ranged from the 'segregated' athlete, who appeared to display the least understanding, to the 'committed' athlete who appeared to display the greatest. He also suggested that the extent to which athletes displayed their Christianity was influenced by the consequences of doing so. The 'segregated' athletes appeared to display their Christianity in situations where they believed there would be positive consequences such as receiving support from other Christians but kept their faith hidden when they anticipated a negative response, such as embarrassment or derision. In contrast, the 'committed' athletes could feel unease at compromising their Christian beliefs when competing to such an extent that they withdrew from the sport. Stevenson (1991) concluded that there did appear to be an incompatibility between the roles of Christian and athlete.

In Stevenson's (1997) later study he identified the using of sport as an opportunity to share their faith was a strategy adopted by some Christian athletes to deal with the dominant culture of elite, competitive sport. Stevenson (1997) identified five problem areas for athletes: the importance and overwhelming priority given to winning; the importance of social status and the pressure of maintaining this; the expectations surrounding the Christian athletes' relationships with their team and coach; the expectations surrounding their relationships with opponents; and the expectations others have of them as athletes in their surrounding social settings. The athletes' reactions to these problems manifested themselves either as a crisis, as they attempted to live up to the demands of competitive sport, or they began to question the meaning of their participation finding the goals associated with competitive sport

shallow and superficial. The athletes now used the Christian faith to deal with their difficulties in diverse ways. One such strategy was the viewing of sport as an opportunity to share their faith and although they accepted certain aspects of elite sport, they endeavoured to do this by competing in a Christian manner. This enabled them to overcome difficulties such as a crisis of meaning, fluctuating emotions and pressure.

In addition, Stevenson (1997) identified further strategies that Christian athletes use to deal with the difficulties they encountered in elite sport. These included an increased commitment to their sport, which resulted in them giving their best in all situations, whilst other athletes, after struggling to be fully committed Christians, rejected competitive sport and sought more compatible ways of expressing their sporting abilities. Stevenson (1997) concluded that the athletes in his study did experience conflicts with their faith in the dominant culture of elite competitive sport and responded to the conflicts in different ways. Although not directed specifically towards the use of sport as an opportunity to share the Christian faith, what Stevenson's (1991, 1997) studies provide is primary evidence of the suggestions indicated in the theoretical literature (Coakley, 2016; Hoffman, 1992e) that Christian athletes do use this as a strategy to overcome some of the contentious issues they experience as Christian athletes.

It is the use of sport as a tool for evangelism that has become central to modern-day muscular Christianity which goes under the guise of sports ministry or 'mission' (Watson, 2007a). This approach is met with a mixed response in the literature. Whilst it is met with support in some quarters (e.g., Pfitzner, 2013; White, 2012; Watson,

2007a), notably Catholicism (Costantini & Lixey, 2011; Feeney, 1995, 2006; Liberia Editrice Vaticana, 2006), it is also critiqued (e.g., Brock, 2012; Erdozain, 2010; Higgs, 1992; Hoffman, 2010; Krattenmaker, 2010; Ladd & Mathisen, 1999; Mathisen,1994/2006). Central to this assessment appears to be the over-ridding value and prominence given to sport, a culture that can contrast starkly with Christianity, as a means to attract others to faith whilst making little attempt to influence the morality or tackle the more controversial issues associated with sport. Consequently, it is argued that Christian sports organisations do little to promote change in the culture of sport, an environment which is often at odds with the Christian message they seek to deliver.

What this consideration of evangelism in sport reveals is that literature in this area appears to be heavily biased towards a North American perspective, much of which is based on theoretical research. Although not intended to address the concept of evangelism in sport, there is some primary evidence of Christian athletes using sport as an opportunity to share their faith (Stevenson,1991, 1997). As with much of the desk-based research, this focuses on elite evangelical athletes. Given the evangelical nature of these athletes' faith, which suggests an inclination towards sharing their faith, it is difficult to determine if this approach is representative of all Christian athletes. Furthermore, in competing at the highest level these athletes have a prominent platform for sharing faith, an opportunity not afforded those competing at a lower level. Consequently, the evidence in this area at present is confined, almost exclusively, to a specific demographic. This exposes the need for research of greater diversity to consider the experiences of Christian athletes competing in broader cultural contexts,

ability levels and Christian denominations if a greater understanding of evangelism through sport is to be achieved.

Conclusion

The aim of this chapter has been to provide an initial review of key aspects of the literature on the relationship between sport and Christianity. Having highlighted the extent of the existing literature, the discussion moved to focus on the themes of 'Sport and Religion' and 'Sport, Religion and Culture'. Within these themes particular attention has been paid to prayer and evangelism, given that these were central to the empirical findings of the study. A recurring factor has been the predominance of input not only from North America but also from that of secondary source (desk-based) study. In an effort to identify primary evidence there has been the need to explore disciplines outside of the sport-Christianity interface, the findings from which have usefully served to reiterate the initial observation of the almost exclusive input from North America. This being the case, the review highlights the call for primary research within the field to address the lived experiences of athletes. Furthermore, given that a larger portion of the literature leans towards the experiences of elite, evangelical athletes there is a clear need for evidence from a greater diversity of athletes not only in terms of cultural context but also differing ability levels and approaches to faith. This will help to grow knowledge and understanding of the relationship between sport and Christianity and the potential to assist athletes as they seek to live out their faith in the context of sport. With this in mind, the following chapter moves to review further themes in the literature on the sport-Christianity connection.

Chapter 3: Sport, Spirituality and Ethics

Introduction

Having noted the dominance of the Christian faith in the wider literature on 'Sport, Spirituality and Religion', the previous chapter then explored the two key themes of 'Sport and Religion' and 'Sport, Religion and Culture'. In turn, this discussion highlighted the predominance of secondary source material in this area, the majority of which is written from a North American perspective. Continuing the in-depth examination of background literature, this chapter explores the further themes of 'Spirituality and Sport' and 'Sport, Religion and Ethics' both of which have specific relevance to the present research. The discussion focuses predominantly on the academic literature paying particular attention to the areas of worship and competition. The chapter concludes by bringing together the findings from each of these themes, along with those reviewed in the previous chapter to give an overall appraisal of the extant literature. In doing so, it identifies a series of gaps in existing literature and highlights opportunities for research to enhance knowledge on the relationship between sport and the Christian faith.

Spirituality and Sport

On the surface, sport appears to be a purely physical activity, yet its reach goes beyond the physical. Spirituality is concerned with the perspectives, convictions and customs which give meaning to an individual's life, and which extend beyond those experienced by the five senses (Wakefield, 1983). In turn, sport can provide an avenue for individuals to experience that which goes beyond the scope of their physical senses. Scholars approach this matter from a variety of perspectives

including consideration of the extent to which sport has a natural or inherent spirituality, whether spiritual or religious experiences are possible during participation in sport and the potential for sport to become a spiritual activity by performing it as an act of worship.

It is in their attempts to explain the meaning of sport that scholars have suggested its innate spiritual nature (e.g., Higgs, 1992; Robinson, 2007a; Saint Sing, 2004; Sheehan, 1992). This viewpoint rests on the basis that sport carries a spiritual dimension. Advocates of this view suggest that the meaning of sport goes beyond rationalisation and that there is a mystical aspect to sport, which exceeds human understanding (e.g., Cooper, 1998; Ryan, 1989; Slusher, 1993). Gazette and Hukill (1977) suggest that Asian sports have a spirituality at their centre which gives physical movement a deeper meaning. Participants become involved in rituals and meditations prior to the activity to achieve calmness, enlightenment and blessing as they seek physical perfection. The link between western understandings of sport and spirituality appears less clear. However, in discussing this highly subjective issue, many scholars highlight the similar characteristics which they believe indicate a spiritual dimension to sport. Those most frequently discussed include a heightened sense of awareness (Ryan, 1989; Saint Sing, 2004), the integration of body and soul (Murphy & White, 1995; Thomas, 1996), the opportunity for transcendence (Carmody, 1992; Kelly, 2021; Morgan, 1993), the pursuit of excellence (Cooper, 1998) and the opportunity for self-knowledge (Price, 2001; Slusher, 1993).

Ryan (1989) suggests that in the western context ‘spirituality’ means ‘aliveness’, which is measured by levels of awareness which are heightened through sport. This sense

of awareness takes on a spirituality when there is a balance between body, mind and soul (Murphy & White, 1995; Thomas, 1996). This is likened to the Greek 'arete', the state of grace and excellence. Pursuing this state can bring an awareness of the sacred (Cooper, 1998). With the uniting of body and soul, transcendence can occur (Saint Sing, 2004) and a sense of union with something beyond the athlete themselves (Slusher, 1993). Participation in sport, as with religion, can help individuals learn about themselves whilst also developing self-awareness. This self-knowledge goes beyond physical capability to include emotional and psychological responses to different sporting situations (Slusher, 1993). This view is supported by Price (2001) and Thomas (1996) who express the belief that the reason individuals participate in sport is the search for self and truth. To achieve this, there is a need for introspection and meditation. This enables the individual to be open to the other, which Price (2001) believes lies deep within the self.

Central to the potential inherent spiritual nature of sport is the element of play (Morgan, 1993; Saint Sing, 2004; Sheehan, 1992). For Huizinga (1950), a Dutch cultural historian whose work proved foundational in this area, play is imbued with a sacred or spiritual dimension. A theological perspective was offered by Rahner (1972), a Jesuit catholic theologian, who posited God as the 'ultimate player'. Johnston (1983) documents theological reflection on play from the early church fathers through to the modern era. Although adopting a positive perspective, Johnston (1983) cautions against the tendency to deify play and to identify it with the Christian faith. The concept of play has also been studied in numerous academic disciplines including the philosophy and the sociology of sport (e.g., Higgs. 1990; Oriard, 1991; Ryall, Russell & Maclean, 2013; Schmid, 2011), leisure studies (e.g., Heintzman, 2003; Heintzman,

Van Andel & Visker, 1994/2006; Holmes, 1992; Ryken, 1987) and theology (e.g., Huizinga, 1950; Rahner, 1972). The role of play has also figured significantly in literature exploring the relationship between sport, spirituality and religion (e.g., Bolt, 2018; Hamilton, 2008; Higgs, 1992; Kretchmar, 2011; Saint Sing, 2004, 2011; Watson & Kretchmar, 2017) and it is this element that scholars have looked to when arguing for a theology of sport (Dailey, 2018; Ellis, 2014; Harvey, 2014; Treat, 2015, 2018). The overriding suggestion in this literature is that play is an autotelic activity in that it serves no other purpose than that derived from taking part and brings with it sensations such as a sense of freedom, spontaneity, enjoyment, pleasure and wholeness. These characteristics may then enable those involved to transcend themselves and to add a spirituality to their participation.

For Treat (2015, 2018), the instinct humans have to play is natural and God inspired, and to be enjoyed as a gift of creation. Drawing on biblical doctrine, Treat (2015, 2018) argues creation extends beyond its initial inception to how the world was meant to be, and that Christians play a role in developing God's creation for the good of others. This leads to the suggestion that the play instinct inevitably develops structure, organisation, universal codes and rules, and an element of competition, all of which culminates as sport. Consequently, Treat (2015, 2018) advocates that as a part of God's intended creation sport is intrinsically good. Treat (2015, 2018) does, however, acknowledge that a Christian understanding of competitive sport is more complex given the contrasting aims of Christianity, with its emphasis on love and prioritising the needs of others, and competitive sport, which puts self and the pursuit of success first. As a utilitarian pursuit, characterised by quantification, success, commercialism and bureaucracy, sport has become more work-like than play-like (Guttman, 1978/2004;

Overman, 2011). This focus on outcome rather than process runs the risk of extinguishing the element of play and with it the potential for a spirituality (e.g., Huizinga, 1950; Johnston, 1983; Novak, 1967/1994).

The possibility of athletes undergoing a spiritual experience while participating in sport is also discussed (e.g., Higgs, 1992; Higgs & Braswell, 2004; Hoffman, 1992g; 1992d; Robinson, 2007a). This issue is complicated by the difficulty in validating spiritual experiences given that they are highly personal encounters, and it is solely on an individual's conviction of the experience that any legitimacy can be claimed (Hoffman, 1992g; Watson, 2007b). Although spiritual experiences tend to be associated with religious rituals, settings and practices, they have been reported in activities such as art and music, which appear to have no obvious religious connection (e.g., Hoffman, 1992g). This being the case, there remains the view that spiritual experiences are possible in sport (e.g., Murphy & White, 1995; Prebish, 1993a, 1993c; Sheehan, 1992; Watson, 2007b). Debates in this area have led to consideration of sports where these experiences are most likely to occur. These include sports with a high degree of risk and potential for serious injury, those demanding long periods of discomfort, sports which take place in nature and those with the opportunity for extended periods of contemplation. It is the 'altered state of consciousness' (Hoffman, 1992g; Thomas, 1996) which can come from participation in these types of sports that appear to share similar qualities to those described as spiritual-religious.

Csikszentmihalyi (1975, 1990), in his studies of happiness, identifies a state of optimal experience as a 'flow experience', with some of its defining characteristics such as a total concentration on the task; a loss of self-consciousness; a loss or disorientation in

terms of time; and an intrinsically rewarding experience being considered synonymous with a spiritual experience. This brings a deep sense of enjoyment and a 'very positive psychological state' (Jackson, Kimiecik, Ford, & Marsh, 1998). For Kelly (2021), Csikszentmihalyi (1975, 1990) was aware that these 'flow experiences' shared many similarities to religious and spiritual experiences. Kelly (2021) seeks to explore this by comparing the concept of flow with insights from some of the world's religious traditions. After describing the elements of flow, Kelly (2021) suggests many of the perceived themes of spirituality relate to those of both a 'flow experience' and those experienced by individuals who participate in sport.

Dillon and Tait (2000) prefer to label a similar psychological state in which athletes describe experiencing an altered sense of perception and a heightened sense of awareness as being 'in the zone'. In adopting this same term, Cooper (1998) relates such experiences to a spiritual dimension in sport. This was also the preferred term of Murphy and White (1995) and which they used to identify experiences in which athletes sense feelings of acute well-being; peace, calm and stillness; detachment; freedom; floating, flying and weightlessness; ecstasy; power and control; being in the present; instinctive action and surrender; mystery and awe; feelings of immortality; and unity. In explaining the characteristics of an 'aesthetic experience' Thomas (1977) outlines qualities such as uniqueness, almost mystical, disorientating in terms of time and space, intrinsically valid, perfect and complete. For Ravizza (1984), this is a 'peak experience' which includes a transcendence of self and is the result of the athlete feeling a sense of harmony or oneness with the movement. Despite the various terms, there is considerable overlap in the qualities highlighted by the different scholars,

qualities which, as highlighted previously, can also be synonymous with those considered to constitute a spiritual or religious experience.

There are those who remain unconvinced as to the potential for spiritual experiences in sport arguing that such instances are extraordinary rather than spiritual, occurring when athletes seem to perform beyond their abilities (e.g., Higgs, 1992; Higgs & Braswell, 2004; Nesti, 2007c). A similar perspective is held by Watson (2007b) in his study of the possible transcendent nature of extreme sports, such as mountaineering and snowboarding and their potential for spiritual or mystical experiences. Extreme sports have a tendency to carry a heightened sense of danger routinely involving a high degree of risk taking by their thrill-seeking participants. Watson (2007b) argues that it is the circumstances and the environment of these extreme sports which can create some of the characteristics associated with the spiritual and sublime such as the spectacular and awe-inspiring wilderness, the time spent alone which brings with it opportunities for contemplation and the discomfort and pain which are synonymous with these extreme sports. Watson (2007b) explains that although often contributing to a highly positive mental state these experiences fall short of a spiritual experience. He goes on to suggest they are more the result of something which occurs in the psyche of the athlete and are akin to peak experiences or Zen states.

Running, a sport that also affords the opportunity for contemplation, is given much consideration as to its potential for spiritual experience (e.g., Higdon, 1992; Hochstelter, 2020; Jones, 2004; Robinson, 2007a; Sands & Sands, 2009; Sands, 2010). Whilst running long distances athletes may need to endure extended periods of discomfort, increasing the potential for spiritual experience (e.g., Hoffman, 1992g;

Murphy & White, 1995). Such ventures also bring with them the possibility of 'runner's high', a phenomenon highlighted by characteristics similar to those believed to be of a spiritual experience such as a sense of well-being, transcendence and appreciation of nature. Prebish (1993c) likens the sacrifice, physical suffering and commitment levels of elite runners to the notion of a religious pilgrimage noting that the overall experience can entail feelings of wholeness and cleansing to the individual.

Robinson (2007a) focuses on marathon running. In analysing a runner's account of participation in the London Marathon, he suggests that the athlete's description contains elements which, for many people, would represent a spiritual or religious experience. He explores the etymology of 'religion' noting the importance of 'obligation' and highlights the commitment the running of a marathon requires, which can often be in response to a significant event in runners' lives, and which manifests itself in months of training. Robinson (2007a) goes on to suggest that the training and running of a marathon, which for many aims to raise funds for charities of significance to them, can become a transformative experience. This brings a purpose and a sense of community with others sharing the same experience. From a different perspective, Joslin (2003) focuses on the way in which running can be turned in to a spiritual practice, such as a form of meditation and prayer. Joslin (2003) outlines a range of meditative practices such as focusing awareness on breathing, which can become a pathway to God.

An alternative perspective for the study of spirituality in sport is proposed by Nesti (2007a, 2007b, 2007c). He advocates for an existential-phenomenological psychological approach to research the phenomena in sport which seeks to gain

access to the athletes' consciousness of an experience or situation. Nesti (2007a, 2007b, 2007c) argues that the attention should be on the athlete as a person rather than as an individual. He suggests that because sport psychology tends to adopt a natural scientific method, based on verifiable concepts, the consideration of terms such as 'spirit', 'spirited' and 'spirituality' have, to a great extent, been overlooked. This is despite the fact that such terms are regularly used in relation to sporting performance. Consequently, Nesti (2007a, 2007b, 2007c) advocates an approach to sports psychology which considers the spirit of the individual as well as their mind and body. This has the potential to provide greater insight into the term 'spirituality' as well as other terms such as character, willpower, resilience and courage and which he argues have often been ignored in the literature.

Given the almost exclusive focus on the positive side of competitive sport, Nesti (2007b) calls for greater research into its more negative elements such as suffering, sacrifice, anxiety, self-doubt, stress and pain and which can be obstacles to success. He suggests there is a need for athletes to learn from what can seem undesirable experiences to develop characteristics such as dedication and mental toughness and which can be of benefit to their pursuit of success in the future. Participation in competitive sport can then be viewed as promoting spiritual growth and so come to take on a spiritual significance for athletes. What Nesti (2007a, 2007b, 2007c) appears to be arguing for here is a more nuanced approached to the study of spirituality in sport rather than an approach which seeks to align athletes' explanations with the perceived characteristics of a spiritual experience. This suggests the need for qualitative based research which focuses on the descriptions and interpretations

of a spiritual dimension by the athletes themselves, an aspect of research that appears to so far have been overlooked.

The significance of spirituality in sport and its role in athlete's lives and their sporting performance led Watson and Nesti (2005), following a review of literature, to advocate for spirituality to be considered in sports psychology research. They suggest that to achieve a greater and, more holistic understanding of sports psychology, four key areas need to be addressed, including: (i) how spirituality can be accommodated into the existing athlete-centred model to assist performance and sporting excellence, (ii) the inclusion of religious and spiritual practices, including prayer, into mental skills training, (iii) the relationship between spirituality and religion and positive psychological states such as flow and peak experiences, and (iv) the role of spirituality in consultancy work. In the perspectives reviewed so far, any potential sense of spirituality in sport seems to be an experience that athletes have little or no control over encountering. A further perspective, however, appears to be determined by the athletes themselves through their intention to perform sport as worship and it is to this phenomenon that the chapter now turns.

Sport as Worship

Much of the initial literature exploring the notion of sport as worship was theoretically based and focused predominantly on elite evangelical athletes competing in US sport (e.g., Aitken, 1993; Coakley, 2016; Higgs, 1992; Higgs & Braswell, 2004; Hoffman, 1992a, 2010; Neal, 1981; Prebish, 1993a). Aitken (1993) and Hoffman (1992a, 2010) in observing this approach to worship reference the maxim of a Total Release Performance, a concept developed by Neal (1981). This draws on St. Paul's athletic

metaphors to suggest that it is the intensity with which the athlete competes and their love for God which determines the value of a sporting performance as a spiritual offering. By evidencing their love for God and competing with intensity, athletes express their thankfulness for what God has done for them through a praise performance. This research notes that sport as worship may be used by athletes as a response to the perception that sport is a self-focused and self-indulgent activity, a view which can cause athletes to question the value and meaning of sport. This athlete led perspective appears to contrast with that of the predominantly theoretical based literature which suggests an inherent quality to sport or an innate spiritual nature. In seeking to overcome this lack of meaning, athletes may view sport as an opportunity to worship and for the glory of God. This can cause athletes to believe that sport is God's plan for their lives. In this view, sport takes on ultimate meaning and athletes make a commitment to improve and perfect their skills. The athlete perceives their life to be defined by faith and which helps them maintain a balanced attitude towards their sport.

Related literature also includes consideration of the potential issues that the notion of sport as worship raises (e.g., Aitken, 1993; Higgs, 1992; Higgs & Braswell, 2004; Hoffman, 1976, 1992a, 1992b, 2010). There is the suggestion that such an approach is used to justify some of the more debateable aspects of sport such as self-promotion, aggression and violence. As a result, rather than easing athletes' concerns over the superficiality of sport, it can merely add to the conflicts. The literature notes the coincidence that giving one's best in sport as worship also has the potential to improve the athlete's chances of success. Issues are raised regarding the physical body, which rather than being treated as a divine creation, can become viewed as a machine to be

trained for maximum efficiency and productivity, thereby questioning its sacramental nature. These factors cause Hoffman (1992a, 2010) to ask whether sport can truly be performed as an act of worship or if it in fact runs the risk of distorting worship.

More recently, Ellis & Weir (2020) attempt to offer a deeper understanding of sport as worship through empirical research. Their aim is to establish whether an athlete's intention to praise and glorify God through their participation in sport can be legitimately construed as a form of worship. To achieve this, they analysed the data collected from interviews and other published evidence. Weir had previously conducted the 120 interviews over a period of 14 years with elite evangelical athletes. These interviews were not conducted specifically to address their research question but were of a more general nature providing an opportunity for athletes to discuss the relationship between their Christian faith and their sport. Ellis and Weir (2020) identify 38 of the interviews as producing data relevant to worship and these were then analysed in light of theological understandings of worship. In sum, Ellis and Weir (2020) argue that worship is a social activity with a communal element consisting of repetitive actions usually identified as rituals. These actions are likened to those of the sporting world and the repeated ritualistic acts, which can include religious gestures, of athletes. They also note the similarities in worship and sport in each being marked by special times and places. Much like Christian worship has its seasonal events including Christmas and Easter, different sports have their own sporting calendars, dominated by their major events. Furthermore, just as Christianity has its special religious sites for worshippers such as cathedrals, individual sports have their major sporting venues which take on added significance for competitors and spectators alike. Incorporating historical and theological perspectives, Ellis and Weir

(2020) point to worship being a response to God by humans, and one which results in the glorification of God, a perspective shared across many Christian traditions. In analysing different Christian translations of the Bible, they highlight how glorification asserts God's sovereignty and recognises God's presence with a sense of wonder.

Ellis and Weir (2020) determine that the concept of giving glory to God is at the core of many elite Christian athletes' beliefs regarding their participation in sport. Athletes primarily seek to achieve this through the actions required of their sport (i.e., running, throwing and catching, kicking) rather than by the more traditional practices of hymns and prayers. They go on to suggest that the notion of glorifying God through sport stems from a recognition by the athlete that their sporting skills and talents are a gift from God (Altrogge, 2008; Coakley, 2016; Ellis, 2014; Null, 2016). This can lead to the conviction that by using their skills when competing, and after honing them to their potential through practice, athletes acknowledge that the source of their skills and consequently their achievements should be attributed not to themselves but towards God, the giver of their gift. In this respect, athletes can then come to see their sport as their 'calling'. Participating in sport, therefore, demands athletes give everything to their performance to develop their abilities to their full potential and achieve what God intended for them.

Ellis and Weir (2020) further suggest that a feature that helps to characterise sport as worship is the manner and behaviour of athletes both during competition (which requires that they respect both the rules and their fellow participants including spectators, opponents and officials) and afterwards. This highlights an ethical dimension to sport as worship which can be evidenced in athlete behaviours and the

manner in which they compete. This necessitates that athletes adhere to the rules and regulations of their sport and avoid adopting practices that may breech moral standards. Ellis and Weir (2020) also argue that it was important that a level of respect is met by athletes, both during and following sporting events, for team-mates, opponents, officials and spectators. A similar argument is outlined by Smith (2018), who draws on his experiences as an elite athlete and coach to help Christians practically apply their faith-based values and beliefs to sport. Smith (2018) discusses the concept of glorifying God, which he suggests goes beyond trying one's best and giving credit to God. He advocates that, regardless of the outcome, of far greater significance to God is how an athlete behaves and conducts themselves and the relationships they develop through sport.

Given their focus on evangelical Christians and the significance of the Bible for this group of believers, Ellis and Weir (2020) examine the vocabulary associated with worship and suggest both Jesus and Paul make clear links between everyday life and worship. This leads to their consideration of the connection between Sunday worship and a worshipful life as it exists today. They suggest that there is a seamless link between the two, where corporate worship enables the rehearsal of everyday Christian living through the practice of the attitudes and intentions of faith. It is an opportunity to learn to forgive, to be thankful and to offer ones' whole existence in everyday life to God. As a result, worship is not confined to a particular time or place but about all of life, both work and play (e.g., Earey, 1995, Ellis, 2009; Forrester, McDonald & Tellini, 1996) and can take the form of any activity (e.g., Benson, 2013; Davies, 1994). On this basis, Ellis and Weir (2020) consider sport to be a perfectly acceptable avenue for worship. Indeed, having explored worship from a theological perspective, Ellis and

Weir (2020) conclude that the experiences of elite Christian athletes, and their understanding of worship, show sport to be appropriate activity for offering worship.

Like Ellis and Weir's (2020) study, Stevenson's (1997) research was also confined to elite evangelical Christian athletes. He too identified a group of athletes who believe their faith required that they worship in all situations, including sport, and if they were to achieve this, it required they give everything to their sport and fully develop their sporting skills. Stevenson's (1997) study was not intended to address the concept of sport as worship but, as with the use of sport to share the Christian faith noted previously, this is identified as a response by North American athletes to resolve some of the issues they encounter when competing. Although Ellis and Weir's (2020) study both supports and builds on Stevenson's (1997) work to provide greater depth to the understanding of sport as worship, neither study is designed specifically to address the notion of sport as worship, indicating the need for research that specifically researches this issue.

The concept of sport as worship has more recently been debated within the theoretical literature. White (2018) argues for a sacramental world view to be adopted which considers both creation and human structures as playing a part in witnessing to God and which contrasts with a dualistic view of the world which sees the sacred and the secular as separate domains. In arguing for a sacramental world view, White (2018) draws on theological literature to suggest the language of the Bible shows worship, rather than being restricted to activities considered as religious, encompasses all of life, including the emotional, social and physical dimensions. He argues for worship being a fundamental part of being human and on this basis, worship is not divorced

from any aspect of life including sport, indeed it cannot be avoided. Furthermore, through sport individuals play and perfect their skills, which White (2018) suggests are the intrinsic goods of sport, and the practice of which can provide humans with the opportunity to praise God for their embodiment and the gifts they have received for playing sport. In adopting a sacramental world view, he suggests a continuum of God's sacramental presence in worship ranging from religious contexts, such as baptism, communion, etc. to those of a less formal nature and can include pursuits such as sport, dance, etc. White (2018) argues God presence is unique and specific to each area of worship along the spectrum. The more traditional view of the sacraments can both refresh and redirect humans for the less traditional liturgies such as sport, which can also mediate God's presence. For White (2018) these differing liturgies complement each other. They can serve to enlighten and augment how humans recognise and encounter God's presence with the motivation of glorifying God with every aspect of life.

In contrast, Harvey (2014) argues against the concept of sport as worship as he looks to propose a theology of sport. As discussed earlier, Harvey (2014) believes play, and sport, to be autotelic in that they are meaningful in that they serve their own purpose, but also unnecessary. Harvey (2014) outlines how when sport has become attached to external agendas such as politics or business etc. sport has become corrupted. He further suggests that the church and Christians have been misguided in trying to harness sport for its own ends through activities such as evangelism and which have the potential to damage sport. Moreover, when sport becomes assigned with value beyond itself it loses its autotelic nature. It is the autotelic nature of both play and worship that Harvey (2014) suggests has caused play to be seen as worship, as was

the practice of ancient cultures. In contrast, he indicates that modern society no longer takes this view and that the church has endeavoured to keep sport and worship apart. He does, however, acknowledge there are similarities between the two, particularly with liturgical worship such as baptism, the Eucharist, which, like play, are organised physical activities which neither create nor achieve anything but have their own intrinsic value. For Harvey (2014), this is where the similarities end, with God being present in worship but stepping back from sport to allow humans to play and express their deepest identity, an identity that was freely loved into existence by God. Although acknowledging worship is possible through all other activities including art, science, technology and work, Harvey (2014) concludes that sport, in not being directed to the glory of God but a celebration of who humans are themselves, is the only activity that is not worship.

In the existing literature addressing the sport-Christianity interface, sport as worship is one of the few areas that offers evidence from both secondary and empirical research. However, the data used to derive these findings is not designed to specifically address the notion of sport as worship and so relies on evidence from a more general consideration of the relationship between sport and faith. The first-hand evidence that does exist is restricted to a particular demographic of evangelical athletes competing at the elite level and is limited in its capacity to speak to other ability levels and denominational variety. Furthermore, although broached in the theoretical literature, the issues Christian athletes encounter in expressing sport as worship, appears to have so far been neglected from the perspective of primary research. What the review of literature on sport as worship appears to indicate is both a need for empirical research which seeks to specifically explore the concept of sport as worship but also

from the perspectives of a broader range of athletes both in terms of athletic ability but also approach to faith. There is also an imperative to establish athlete-led evidence into the issues Christians encounter in expressing worship through sport. Contributions into these so far under-reported areas would grow knowledge and therefore a greater understanding of concept of sport as worship.

Sport, Religion and Ethics

A significant portion of the extant literature considers the relationship between Christian ethics and competitive sport (e.g., Coakley, 2016; Higgs & Braswell, 2004; Hoffman, 1992h, 2010; Kretchmar, 2013; Lixey, 2013; Watson & White, 2007). The term 'ethics' originates from the Greek term 'ethos' and is concerned with right and wrong, something that can mean different things to different people (Saint Sing, 2004). People who hold Christian beliefs are likely to have their opinions, regarding what they believe to be right and wrong, influenced by these beliefs. Any reference to ethics also raises issues concerning morality and values. Morality is concerned with human behaviour with respect to the distinction between right and wrong. In religious terms, values refer to the accepted standards of a group's religious beliefs, in this case Christianity.

The separation of sport from its religious roots has led to discussions regarding the respective values of sport and Christianity and if any congruence between the two exists (e.g., Coakley, 2016; Higgs & Braswell, 2004; Overman, 1997, 2011; Price, 2001). Acknowledgement is given to the positive values that can be experienced through sport, such as co-operation, enjoyment, hard work, honesty and loyalty, (e.g.,

Kretchmar, 2013; McNamee, 2011; Parry, 2007a, 2007b; Robinson, 2007b; Scarpa & Carraro, 2011). There is much support for these positive values from a Catholic perspective (e.g., Baum & Coleman, 1989; Feeney, 1995, 2006; Kelly, 2012). Sport and Christianity are viewed as acting in accordance with each other, providing enrichment and fulfilment for both. In doing so, individuals find gratification, civilizations evolve and an avenue to harmony for the world is provided (Kerrigan, 1992). Sport is also viewed as a powerful tool with young people given its potential to inspire them to positive moral values (Lixey 2013).

For Robinson (2007b), virtues lie at the heart of any understanding of spirituality and morality, and it is those such as integrity, humility and self-reliance, which can be encouraged through the practice of sporting skills, and which allow for an awareness and appreciation of others and the development of a life purpose. Parry (2007a) looks at the potential of sport and physical education when it comes to the moral education of pupils. In addition to the academic, there is the need for holistic development, which includes the mind and spirit. As well as being characterised by its rules, sport brings with it a set of internal values and ethical requirements. This can play a key role in the nurturing of the moral education of pupils in terms of qualities such as equality, fairness, justice and respect for others. Parry (2007b) also considers the ethical and political values of the Olympic Games which he argues encourage respect and mutual recognition, solidarity, equity, anti-discrimination, peace and multiculturalism. He highlights how in his restoration of the modern Olympic games Pierre de Coubertin's aim was to restore the notion of the 'religio athletae' which called for the athlete's commitment to the Olympic values set out in the Olympic Oath. However, Parry (2007b) argues that essentially this is not religion in a formal sense but is based in

ethics and sentiment. At the centre of Coubertin's concern was the moral value of sport with its potential to promote moral commitment and a sense of purpose.

The proposed similarities between the values of sport and Christianity are suggested to come from the influence of 'The Protestant Ethic'. This term was originally used by Weber (1905) in outlining the links between Protestantism and Capitalism and to which he identifies seven virtues: worldly asceticism, rationalisation, goal-directed behaviour, achieved status, individualism work ethic, and time ethic. This ethic can cause individuals to view their work as their 'calling' and any success in this area is believed to confirm this view. The individual then glorifies God by displaying self-discipline and hard work in their career. Consequently, material success may become linked with spiritual goodness. Overman (1997, 2011) studies the influence of this in sport and notes how its values not only pervade US society but are also fundamental to success in sport. This perspective brings the potential for athletes to see their involvement in sport as their 'calling'.

In contrast, there are those who are less convinced. For example, Higgs and Braswell (2004) argue against the values of sport being the same as those promoted by Christianity on the basis that sports do not encourage the qualities proclaimed by St. Paul, such as love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness and temperance. They accept that on occasion there can be some overlap and sport does not necessarily encourage more sinful qualities. However, Higgs and Braswell (2004) claim it is difficult to understand how opposing athletes can commit themselves to intense training for extended periods of time in pursuit of glory and a worldly prize whilst at the same time displaying qualities such as meekness and gentleness. They

suggest further complications can arise when the winners acquire vast amounts of money. Price (2001), whilst acknowledging there are negative values associated with sport, suggests this is not always the case. Likewise, he argues there are religious beliefs which do not always encourage peaceful, caring and sympathetic values.

The contentious nature of the values of sport and Christianity leads to consideration of the influence Christian beliefs have on athletes' participation and decision making in sport (e.g., Armstrong, 1992; Ballantine, 1988; Hoffman, 1992h, 2010; Slusher, 1992). According to Hoffman (1992a, 2010), sport provides a rich environment to analyse the ethics of human behaviour. By participating in sports individuals agree to abide by the set rules yet, there remains considerable freedom for unethical practices such as intimidating behaviour and exploiting an opponent's injury. Some sports, for example boxing, may, within their rules, permit seemingly unethical behaviour. Hoffman (1992a, 2010) goes on to suggest that this may result in athletes, who hold Christian beliefs, feeling restricted by their beliefs and consequently competing at a disadvantage. This could result in athletes dropping out of a sport if the conduct required is inappropriate and creates too much conflict with their beliefs.

In outlining a range of Christian based ethical decisions, Hoffman (1992h, 2010) explains a perspective that requires individuals to conform to and apply strict moral codes and which calls for little reflective moral reasoning or consideration of the consequences. To clarify this, he offers the example whereby athletes believe it is their moral responsibility, based on the Bible, to compete as intensely as possible. However, a more flexible approach recognises that biblical doctrine can be applied too literally and simplistically. Hoffman (1992a, 2010) advocates that contemporary efforts

to apply Christian ethics to sport centre around the need for Christian athletes to play to the best of their ability, the similarities between living as an athlete and a Christian and the value of promoting sport as means of evangelism. However, for Slusher (1992), applying Christian ethics to sport totally contradicts the concept of sport. He advocates that Christian morality has no place in modern sport given it is about winning, not the development of the opponent. In considering the environment of sport, he believes that ethical decisions are usually resolved whilst the athlete is participating. These emotionally charged sporting occasions can give a good indication of a basic morality, any actions occurring during these times being totally authentic and show where an athlete's true values lie. Slusher (1992) highlights the hypocrisy which appears to exist when athletes use ploys, which are contrary to Christian ethics to gain supremacy, and which might cause consternation. As such, he argues as much as we might like athletes in sport to behave in a particular way, it is not really expected of them.

The complexity of ethical decision making in sport has increased with the influence of the Protestant Ethic and its move towards sport as a professional pursuit. This has brought elements such as sponsorship, the buying and selling of players and commercialism, etc. This change in the fundamental character of sport from play-like to work-like is argued to have played a significant role in a fall in ethical standards (e.g., Beamish & Ritchie, 2006; Cashmore, 2012). Additionally, as athletes seek performance gains, they have turned to areas of sports science such as physiology, psychology, biomechanics, nutrition, etc. With these elements and practices of sport can come questions of an ethical nature for Christian athletes (e.g., Baum & Coleman, 1989; Deardorff & White, 2008; Flake, 1992; Heintzman, Van Andel & Visker,

1994/2006, Parry, 2007a, 2007b; Parry, Nesti & Watson, 2011). The ethical issues considered include aggressive play, the moral significance given to the rules, gamesmanship, overtraining, stewardship of the environment, intimidating behaviour, cheating, duplicity, etc.

From the perspective of primary evidence, Kretschmann & Benz (2012b) researched if the moral values and beliefs of German Christian athletes contrasted with their fellow competitors. They interviewed ten Christian athletes who compete in both team and individual sports at a high level and whose ages ranged from 18 to 42. They note how the over-riding belief for the athletes is that God has a plan for their lives and from which other beliefs emerge, and which help them cope with issues in competitive sport. These beliefs include that their sporting abilities are a gift from God, God loves them and is a source of motivation. Kretschmann & Benz (2012b) observe that the Christian athletes' moral values in competitive sports are based on those of the Bible such as honesty, respect and integrity. Kretschmann & Benz (2012b) suggest that athletes do, mostly, live up to these ideals and which manifests in their playing fairly. In contrast, the respondents exceed their moral limits when they purposefully act wrongly by cheating or hurting others. However, there are other instances when they can struggle, which are often linked to the different pressures of competing and the culture of sport. What Kretschmann & Benz (2012b) offer here, is empirical evidence of the moral values of Christian athletes competing in sport. However, with its focus on high level German athletes it provides little insight into the values of athletes competing outside this level and cultural context and is a key limitation of the research. As such, there is need for research to encompass a greater diversity of cultural settings and ability levels to develop deeper understanding on this issue.

As interest in the area of sport, religion and ethics has grown, there has been greater specificity with literature focusing on a single issue in sport in relation to the Christian faith such as doping (Rodek, Sekulic, & Pasalic, 2009; Shafer, 2012; Trothen, 2008), technological advances (Trothen, 2011, 2012), medical interventions for reasons other than health (Hamilton, 2006), the sacrificing of health for performance (Sinden, 2012) and gambling (Ballatine, 1988). The ethics of issues possibly more pertinent to athletes of faith such as praying to win (Kreider, 2003), competing on a Sunday (Ballatine, 1988), and pride and humility (Watson & White, 2007) are also subject to debate. A portion of the literature focuses on the ethics of individual sports. Pursuits such as boxing (e.g., Koehlinger, 2012; Leone & Leone, 1992; Shirley, 1999) and, in more recent times, mixed martial arts (e.g., Borer & Schafer, 2011) are the subject of much consideration both individually, and given their shared violent nature, jointly (e.g., Wolff, 2021; Watson & Brock, 2014; 2015). Discussions here centre around the aim of these sports being to inflict physical harm on an opponent, a practice which contrasts with the care of others encouraged by Christianity. The morality of sports which cause similar harm to animals such as hunting are also scrutinised (e.g., Morgan & Meier, 1995; Peiser, 1997; White & Hill, 2017). Motor sports are considered not only from their potential impact on the environment (Holmes, 1992) but are also, along with extreme sports, debated on the basis that for Christians life is sacred and intended to be nurtured, yet these activities by their very nature bring the risk of injury or even death (Newman & Giardina, 2009; Newman, 2010; Watson, 2007b).

It was the aggressive nature of ice-hockey and its potential to push the extremes of the sport's ethic that caused Dunn and Stevenson (1998) to research the attitude and

behaviours of participants in an evangelical church ice hockey league in eastern Canada. Despite being restricted to one sport and within a specific sporting environment, this study provides a useful insight into the ethical dilemmas of Christian athletes. Dunn and Stevenson (1998) noted the intention of such leagues is that individuals participate in a Christian manner. In-depth interviews were conducted to determine firstly, whether the dominant values of the league are Christian or those of secular competitive elite sport and secondly, the extent to which the players were able to apply their Christian values whilst participating. Dunn and Stevenson (1998) identified three types of players: 'consistent' players who generally adhered to the rules and expectations of the league and demonstrated their Christianity when competing; 'struggling' players experienced more problems and had a tendency to conform to the values of sport; and 'nominal' players, who despite often transgressing the rules and expectations, appeared to show little remorse about doing so. Dunn and Stevenson (1998) concluded that despite being far from perfect and that there were conflicts, Christian values prevail over the values of secular competitive sport. This research provides unique insight into the values of Christian athletes in what is a highly physical and potentially violent sport although, as with other research which is characterised by a very narrow focus, necessitates research on a wider range of physical sports and in more diverse sporting contexts. Despite individual sports bringing their own specific ethical issues, a key ingredient of all sports is the element of competition, an aspect of sport which is keenly debated and to which the discussion now seeks to examine in greater depth.

Competition

The potential moral issues athletes face from the competitive element of sport are highlighted throughout the literature (e.g., Armstrong, 1992; Hoffman, 1986; Robinson, 1997; Spencer, 2000; Watson, 2011; Watson & White, 2007; Weir, 2008). What appears to be central to these debates is the definition of competition. Attention is given to its etymology which indicates a striving together of opponents as they cooperate to bring out the best in each other (e.g., Hyland, 1978, 1988; Kretchmar, 1995; Smith, Johnson & Hiller, 2012; Treat, 2015; 2018; Weir, 2008). It is this definition that Watson and White (2007) focus on in their reflection on modern day competitive sport from a Christian theological perspective. In explaining how competition has become pervaded by a 'win-at-all-costs' mindset they consider how sport fits both theologically and ethically with the Christian faith. They advocate that competitive sport has the potential to encourage individuals to bring out the best in each other and argue that, when played in its true spirit, it also has the potential to provide participants with opportunities for self-discovery, experiences of excellence and the building of relationships within society.

Armstrong (1992) considers competition from a Christian perspective and claims the prime factor in this being the attitude of the participant, the right attitude promoting healthy competition whereas an attitude of hostility can be evil. For Armstrong (1992), sports which encourage participants to perform to their best and improve their skill level but without the potential for physical harm, such as golf and running, promote healthy competition. Other sports, such as basketball and football, played within the rules and with the right attitude, are permissible, however, when an athlete adopts a hostile attitude towards their opponent, there is a violation of God's law. There is

further acknowledgement that given the intensity of sport it can be the less desirable aspects of competition such as violence, animosity and aggression that come to the fore (e.g., Hoffman, 2010; Hyland, 1988; Trothen, 2009). It seems then that it is the more physical sports that present the greatest challenge to Christian athletes maintaining a fitting attitude to competition.

Despite the potential pitfalls, there are those who argue that competitive sport can provide an avenue for the development of positive character traits in line with Christianity (see, Linville, 2014; Lixey, 2012, McNamee, 2011; Watson & White, 2007; Weir, 2008). Interestingly, evidence from disciplines such as psychology (e.g., Shields & Bredemeier, 2005; Storch, Roberti, Bravata & Storch, 2004; Storch & Storch, 2002; Storch, Kolsky, Silvestri & Storch, 2001; Weinberg & Gould, 2011b), ethics (e.g., Stoll & Beller, 2008) and exercise and sport (e.g., Bell, Johnson & Peterson, 2011; Mara & Barber, 2000; Ronkainen, Ryba & Tod, 2019) show a tendency for Christian athletes to exclude their faith from competitive sport.

In addition to the theoretical consideration of competition and its relationship to Christian faith there has been some, albeit limited (Kretschmann & Benz, 2012a; Watson & Parker, 2013) empirical research in this area. Beller, Stoll, Burwell and Cole (1996) examined the influence of religious education courses on moral reasoning for 285 North American college students, both athletes and non-athletes, when competing. Their findings led them to conclude that there may be a compartmentalising of faith when competing, a strategy, which as indicated in the previous chapter, was adopted by some elite evangelical Christian athletes in their attempts to juxtapose their roles as Christians and athletes (Stevenson, 1991). Beller,

Stoll, Burwell and Cole (1996) also concluded competition to be neutral and it was the emphasis put on winning that created ethical issues. In looking beyond the sport-Christianity interface literature, what Beller, Stoll, Burwell and Cole (1996) seem to suggest is that despite the theoretical literature debating the positive and negative impact of competition, it is not this element of sport that is problematic for participants, rather it is the significance given to winning. Problematically, it remains unclear if this is the case for athletes from other cultural settings who seek to combine sport and the Christian faith.

Hoven (2016) has provided further empirical evidence of the compartmentalising of sport and faith in his study of how faith informs the actions of 15-year-old Canadian students in sport at two Catholic High schools. He carried out individual, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews and focus groups and noted that although students can integrate their faith in the competitive environment there were also instances where they choose to ignore it. Bennett, Sagas, Fleming and Von Roenn (2005) look outside the athlete's perspective to research a coach's response to the dominant culture of competitive sport. Their case study focused on a coach working with athletes competing at the elite intercollegiate level at an evangelical North American college. Via participant observation, interviews, and documentary analysis a number of contradictions were identified around the importance of winning, the importance of social status and the coach's behaviours both on and off the field. These were resolved by the coach utilizing a take-it-or leave it mentality and relying on God's guidance and blessings. Additionally, as appears to be the case for some Christian athletes a further strategy adopted by the coach was to disconnect faith from sport. The research of Schroeder and Scribner (2006) also focused on an evangelical

Christian college to determine how religion influenced the culture of the athletics department competing at national level in sports. A mixed methodology comprising semi-structured interviews with 19 campus leaders, observations of cultural events and documentary analysis was used to gather data. Schroeder and Scribner (2006) determined that in limiting its membership, influencing its teaching methods and decision making, the values of the athletic department were significantly influenced by evangelical Christianity.

Kelley, Hoffman and Gill (1990) also carried out research in an educational setting but seemed to accept the paradoxical nature of competitive sport and religion in that they attempted to provide insight as to why such a relationship was able to exist. They surveyed 308 students, athletes and non-athletes, from American liberal arts colleges and suggested that a clarification of the motives behind competition may prove beneficial. They hypothesised that Christian athletes may be more likely to experience conflict when their motivations for competing were to defeat the opposition rather than to use the situation to assess or improve performance. Prior to their research, Kelley, Hoffman and Gill (1990) identified three possible motivations for competing athletes: 'winning' which was orientated towards a positive result; 'goal' was orientated towards the athletes' own goals and standards; whilst 'competitiveness' was orientated towards the athletes' enjoyment of striving during competition. They also identified two possible religious orientations: those who valued religion 'intrinsically' for its own sake and those who valued it 'extrinsically' for its usefulness. Kelley, Hoffman and Gill (1990) indicated that athletes who valued religion intrinsically were more orientated towards the enjoyment of competing and their own personal goals, whereas those who valued religion extrinsically were orientated more towards winning. It was also at a

liberal arts college that Keller, Naylor and Stirling (1994/2006) investigated competition in Church Sports Leagues in Canada. By way of survey with 270 undergraduate students they determined that, as in secular leagues, winning was an important motivational factor. They noted that values and attitudes of the athletes in the church leagues were like those in community leagues and that students felt they received little direction as to how to approach sport from a Christian perspective.

Although the theoretical literature relating to the relationship between the Christian faith and competition centres on the influence such beliefs have on the development of character traits that align with the Christian faith this is not always supported by research with athletes. Empirical evidence seems to suggest the element of competition has a limited impact on Christian athletes and that whilst competing they may elect to disassociate faith from sport. Furthermore, there is also the suggestion that it is not competition as such that is the problem for Christian athletes but the emphasis on winning. Whether these findings are indicative of Christian athletes competing outside both North America and their educational establishments can only be established through research into a wider diversity of cultures and settings. Consequently, at the present time there is a limited understanding of the influence of the element of competition for Christian athletes, indicating a call for research that extends the existing boundaries.

Conclusion

The aim of this chapter has been to review two further themes in the background literature: ‘Spirituality and Sport’ and ‘Sport, Religion and Ethics’, each of which have been explored in detail. Particular attention has been paid to the issues of worship

and competition. In comparison to the previous chapter, the discussion has demonstrated greater evidence of empirical research, especially in terms of the relationship between sporting competition and Christianity. However, there remains an over-reliance on desk-based research within these debates. Once again, the featured literature is also dominated by a North American perspective. This being the case, the findings of this chapter endorse those noted previously i.e., that there is a necessity for further primary research to be carried out in these areas, including analyses from wider cultural contexts, ability levels and denominations.

Chapter 4: Researching Christian Athletes

Introduction

Having reviewed the existing literature on the relationship between sport and Christianity, attention now turns to the methods adopted in researching Christian athletes. In placing the athletes at the heart of the research the chapter locates the study within the social sciences. The chapter identifies the ontological and epistemological groundings of the research outlining a qualitative methodology that is inductive in nature. It then describes the methods deployed in data collection and the use of thematic analysis in the exploration of findings. The chapter concludes by providing insight into how academic rigour was pursued in the research through discussions on the issues of trustworthiness, positionality and ethics.

The review of literature has highlighted a range of theoretically and theologically based studies, very few of which focused on the perceptions and experiences of athletes themselves. These individuals are in the best position to offer rich insight into how Christian athletes navigate and negotiate the demands and expectations of competitive sport alongside their faith-based activities and so were considered the primary source of data. In placing athletes, and their behaviours and perspectives, at its centre, the research was positioned firmly within the social sciences. This employs a logical and systematic method of scientific research to study societies, social processes and individuals within those societies (e.g., Robson & McCartan, 2016; Schutt, 2018). The literature review also revealed that much understanding of the sport-Christianity interface is dominated by a North American perspective, and one strongly influenced by evangelical Christianity. This pointed to a scarcity in the

academic study of the experiences of UK-based Christian athletes and how they combine sport with their Christian worldview. In approaching the research consideration was first given to what can be known about the experiences of combining sport and faith for Christian athletes and therefore its ontological stance.

Ontology

Ontology concerns the nature of the world and how social entities are perceived. Principally, it relates to the ontological positions of objectivism and constructionism. These two ontological positions can be explained by two key and frequently used terms in social science, organization and culture. Objectivism, with its tendency to align with realism, views social entities as being external and independent from the social interactions and perspectives of the participants (Bryman, 2016; Cresswell & Poth, 2018; Jonassen, 1991). This perspective holds that organisations are distinct objects with elements such as their own laws, directives, regulated practices and hierarchies, etc. Furthermore, organizations are seen as engendering a particular social order which brings pressure to bear on its members to follow standardized practices. A similar perspective applies to cultures and sub-cultures, which are viewed as the sources of collective values, norms and traditions, into which individuals are socialized.

This position is challenged by constructionism, a position which allows for participants to be actively involved in the social phenomena they inhabit (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Cresswell & Poth, 2018) and something that is in a continual process of negotiation and revision (Bryman, 2016). A constructionist ontology views individuals as searching for understanding in the environments they inhabit as they build subjective meanings

from their experiences and interactions. Constructionism allows for multiple and varied realities and a complexity of perspectives. This philosophical stance aligns with relativism, which holds that reality can only be understood in relation to peoples' experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017) and cannot be distinguished from them (Guba & Lincoln, 2005).

These ontological positions were considered in the context of the intended research and the connection between sport and faith for Christian athletes. This led to the adoption of a constructionist approach and an outlook which deemed the relationship between sport and Christianity to be a product of the perceptions and actions of the athletes themselves. The Christian athletes were considered to be actively involved in, and developing their own subjective meanings with regard to, the sport-Christianity interface. Whilst acknowledging competitive sport to be bound by set objective rules, the study focuses on the personal and subjective experiences of athletes. With the ontological position established, attention shifts to how knowledge and understanding of the experiences of Christian athletes and how they navigate and negotiate the demands and expectations of competitive sport alongside their faith-based activities can be best achieved and therefore the epistemological approach to the research.

Epistemology

The adoption of a constructionist ontology directly informed the epistemological position. Epistemology looks at what can be viewed to be acceptable knowledge in the subject under consideration. It focuses on what evidence can be viewed as appropriate in contributing to an understanding of the relationship between respondents and their environments, in this case sport and the Christian faith.

Consideration was given to positivist and interpretive epistemologies. Positivism advocates for the study of societies in a similar scientific fashion in terms of criteria, strategies and ethos to that of the natural world (Babbie, 2020; Bryman, 2016). It is likely to involve elements such as knowledge that can be established by the senses, the testing of hypotheses, the gathering of facts, research that may be claimed to be value free and an obvious distinction between scientific and normative statements (Bryman, 2016).

Contrasting with this is an interpretivist stance, a position which acknowledges and reflects the differences between the objects of the natural sciences and human beings. Interpretivism places a greater significance on understanding phenomena, advocating that meaning is not independent of human existence. Here, the meanings humans attach to their actions are subjective and are constructed in relation to their everyday lives. These subjective meanings are worked out through social interactions, behaviours and practices and can be particular to an individuals' own values. Social entities therefore cannot be divorced from the actions and understanding of the inhabitants (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Robson & McCartan, 2011; Selwyn, Suter, Smith & Wyse, 2016). Interpretivism is a process which by necessity is encumbered with value (Swinton, 2012). Although, the intention may be that social scientists approach their research from an objective perspective and one that aims to be value-free, there is a recognition that this is not possible. There are numerous areas where the researcher's values can come into play such as choice of research area and methods, the formulation of research questions, and design and data collection techniques. When it comes to the interpretation of the meaning, there is a double hermeneutic in play (Bryman, 2016). Firstly, participants interpret their life perspectives and

circumstances as they relay their experiences during the data collection process. Secondly, the researcher then goes about interpreting these personal interpretations whilst analysing the data (Ginev, 2016). In interpretivism therefore, the position of the researcher can never be completely neutral as they come with their beliefs and values which have an influence on any interpretation of the data (Charmaz, 2008; Swinton, 2012).

Having considered these differing perspectives, an interpretivist epistemological stance was deemed most appropriate in pursuing knowledge and understanding of the sport-Christianity boundary. An interpretivist stance with its emphasis on comprehending the interactions and behaviours of the Christian athletes, and the meanings they attached to them, would contribute appropriate and valuable knowledge to the understanding of the relationship between sport and a Christian worldview.

Methodology

The constructionist, interpretivist nature of the research had implications for the methodological approach adopted in addressing the research question. Initial attention was given to whether a quantitative, qualitative or mixed method strategy was most suitable to gather the relevant data to gain an understanding of the sport-Christianity interface for athletes. To gain this information the process required the researcher to engage with Christian athletes. Given the focus of the research was the experiences of the athletes and therefore the need for nuanced data that was rich in detail, a quantitative study, with its tendency to prioritise numerical over narrative data, was considered unsuitable. A quantitative study may have proved beneficial in

highlighting certain objective aspects of the connection between sport and faith such as how long participants had competed as a Christian athlete, the sporting level they attained. However, this kind of methodological approach would have failed to provide the necessary depth of data required.

If a deeper understanding of the Christian athletes' experiences of combining sport and faith were to be achieved the study demanded insight into their attitudes, thoughts and experiences of the sport-Christianity relationship. This pointed towards a qualitative research methodology, an approach that aligned with the constructionist ontology and interpretivist epistemology in play. Qualitative research studies entities in their natural environment. It endeavours to understand phenomena in relation to the meanings groups or individuals attribute to a social or individual situation (Cresswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). This methodology would engender the meaningful narrative data, with a high level of detail and required by the research question (e.g., Babbie, 2020; Bryman, 2016; Miles & Huberman, 1984; Schutt, 2018). In turn, the gathering of this rich, nuanced data which would be engendered through a qualitative research methodology aligned with the aims of the research and the in-depth exploration of the experiences of Christian athletes.

A qualitative methodology was further supported given the relationship between theory and research in the study. The paucity of primary evidence into the relationship between sport and the Christian faith, particularly in the UK context, effectively ruled out a deductive approach to the study. This approach relies on a hypothesis (or hypotheses) based on existing intelligence to be examined first-hand. Given that there appears to be little established knowledge in this area, the testing of such hypotheses

was considered implausible. In contrast, an inductive approach encourages the emergence of theory from an examination of the information gathered (Babbie, 2020; Bryman, 2016; Flick, 2019; May, 2002; Schutt, 2018). This approach is indicative of a qualitative research strategy (Bryman, 2016). Given that the proposed project would be one of the early forays into empirical research of the sport-Christianity interface the research would be something of a journey of discovery. An inductive approach supports a boarder interpretation and conclusion following reflections on the gathered data regarding how UK-based Christian athletes navigate and negotiate the demands and expectations of competitive sport alongside their faith-based activities. Having identified a constructionist ontology and interpretivist epistemology and established a qualitative methodology as most suitable, the discussion moves to focus on the choice of research method.

Research Methods

In order to gather the necessary data to address the research question it was vital appropriate research methods were adopted. This required a focus on the sampling and recruitment of participants, how the relevant data was to be collected, and how data analysis would be carried out. Each of these areas are outlined and discussed in turn.

Sampling and Participant Recruitment

Primary data collection required access to, and interviews with Christians, and who participated in competitive sport. Gaining access to potential respondents would be far from straight forward given that these athletes only account for a small proportion of competing athletes. Furthermore, the researcher in being new to the area of study

had no prior links with such athletes. The selection of respondents was determined by the research question, namely, how do Christian athletes navigate and negotiate the demands and expectations of competitive sport alongside their faith-based activities? Given that this appeared to be one of the first empirical studies into the combining of sport and faith by athletes, the intention, rather than focusing on a specific group of athletes or Christian denomination, was to provide insight into the experiences of a broad range of Christian athletes. This was from both a sporting perspective, in terms of the type of sport and ability level, but also with respect to their approach to their faith. It was therefore deemed necessary, to recruit athletes who met with these criteria. This resulted in the recruitment of both male and female Christian athletes who competed in a variety of individual and team sports. Their ability levels ranged from club to international level and they represented a range of Christian denominations.

Given the need to both identify and enlist Christian athletes, who account for a small proportion of athletes in the UK, support was sought in the recruitment process. Gatekeeping is the process by which researchers are permitted access to potential participants (Kawulich, 2011), and a necessary strategy when conducting research with minority groups (Berg, 1999). This involved establishing links with organisations which had a remit around the relationship between sport and Christianity. These para-church organisations included those with a focus on either a specific sport, such as ‘Ambassadors in Sport’ (a Christian football organisation) or sport in general, such as ‘Christians in Sport’. One of the main intentions of these bodies is to support Christian athletes as they compete in their own sports alongside non-Christians. It was these

Christian athletes, and their insight into competing in a secular sporting environment, who were considered to meet the intentions of the research.

Initial contact was made with eight potential gatekeepers, these individuals each had an administrative role in a different para-church sport organisation, in January 2006. This initial contact was made by either email or letter. These gatekeepers, controlled access to potential respondents, and with their position of authority, had the potential to positively influence participation by adding credibility and validity to the research (Seidman, 2019). Having established contact with these gatekeepers, time was given to outlining both the research in detail and any potential benefits to both the organisation and their members. This was achieved either through telephone conversation or the exchange of further emails in January/February 2006. Gatekeepers were encouraged to ask questions and seek clarification on any aspect of the study. In explaining the legitimacy and value of the research, the confidence of these gatekeepers was gained and all eight consented to distribute research information letters/emails to their members, a process which began in February 2006. This proved the value of the gatekeeper's role in accessing participants (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). The members of the para-church organisations then self-selected if they wished to be a part of the research.

At the same time, a similar process was undertaken in contacting 26 sports chaplains, both on an individual basis and via the UK sports chaplaincy governing body SCORE (Sports Chaplaincy Offering Resources and Encouragement – now Sports Chaplaincy UK), a charity which exists to provide spiritual and pastoral care and support to those who work in the sporting world. This process was also extended to the UK Head

Offices of the main denominations of the Christian faith and a further nine individuals who represented the clubs, churches, organisations and/or agents of any known Christian athletes. This yielded a further 36 individuals who happily accepted the role of gatekeeper, the eight who declined, emphasising an important part of their role was to protect their members. These different avenues began the process of recruiting participants whilst presenting a further avenue to recruiting athletes, that of 'snowball' sampling (Bryman, 2016). This technique uses interviewees as a way of contacting other potential participants and is a valuable practice when experiencing difficulties in accessing and identifying potential respondents (Schutt, 2018).

The recruitment process led to the interviewing of 25 Christian athletes who had experience of combining faith with the secular environment of competitive sport in the UK. This aligns with the 20 to 30 participants suggested by Bryman (2016) to be the minimum for qualitative study and Adler and Adler's (2012) suggestion of between 12 and 60 respondents. The group comprised 13 male and 12 female athletes with ages ranging from 19 to 66 years. They competed at club, county, region, national or international standard and represented the sports of archery, athletics, basketball, cricket, football, judo, field hockey, ice hockey, netball, rowing, rugby union and triathlon. In explaining their orientation to their faith there were those who described themselves as Anglican/Church of England, Methodist, Baptist, Roman Catholic and non-denominational whilst others chose not to specify. What follows is brief biographical overview of the respondents recruited for the study.

Meet the Athletes [3]

Michelle (26): Michelle plays football for her university, though she had played cricket to county/regional standard previously. She had been brought up in a Christian home and had always attended church but felt that she had truly been a Christian since the age of 16, after which she was baptized. She described herself as an evangelical.

Jayne (36): Before retiring in 2002, Jayne, a runner, had represented both England and Great Britain on the track, the road and cross-country having started running at the age of ten. As her interest in running developed, she stopped attending church but began attending again whilst at university and it was at this time that she felt she became a Christian. She had been involved in some short-term mission work abroad and she had also worked for the church as a volunteer youth worker. Jayne had attended a variety of churches which were predominantly Anglican, though she preferred to describe herself as non-denominational.

Neil (22): Neil had played hockey in the national premier league and had represented his country at U21 level but had decided in the 2003/2004 season to commit to cricket and was primarily a batter. He plays professionally and hopes to continue this career for the next ten years. He had been brought up in a Christian family. He felt he truly committed himself to his faith at the age of 19 in his last year at university. Neil described himself as an Anglican.

[3] Pseudonyms are used throughout this thesis to protect the identity of the respondents. Any identifying information has also been removed to further protect the respondents.

Beatrice (66): Beatrice had taken part in the sport of field archery for 42 years. She had represented her country and been both European and World Champion. She is now retired from international competition but continues to compete locally and is involved in helping to coach others. She has been a Christian all her life and is a steward at her local Methodist church.

Denise (26): Denise had been a member of the British Judo squad as a teenager but is now a rower who had competed at the Olympics and the World Championships. Although she had been brought up in a Christian family, she had not been baptized until she was 20. She attends a Baptist church and describes herself as a Protestant.

Natalie (32): Natalie had played numerus sports as a youngster. She now considers basketball to be her main sport and plays to National League standard. She had also represented her county at netball and athletics. She had become a Christian in her early 20s and described herself as evangelical.

Nigel (21): Nigel had played football throughout his childhood but since the age of 18 plays at the semi-professional level. He had been taken to church throughout his childhood. Nigel had made his own commitment to his faith at the age of 14 when he began to get more involved with the organization of the church. At present, he attends a New Frontiers church and described himself as an evangelical Christian.

Chloe (26): Chloe had played tennis to county standard and represented her university at football. She had been brought up a Christian home and attended church but did

not feel it was very relevant to her at the time. She made a commitment to her faith when she started university. Chloe attends a CE church.

Jack (27): Jack is an international triathlete but had previously been both a professional and semi-professional footballer. He had been brought up in a Christian home where his father was a Minister and had returned to church in his early 20s. Jack explained that he found it difficult to describe his approach to his faith.

Grant (27): Grant had started playing tennis at around the age of nine or ten. He now plays to club standard. He explained that he had had a church up-bringing but it had meant very little to him. However, at the age of 21, whilst at university, he returned to church or his own volition. Grant had worked for a local church in the past and described himself as an evangelical Christian.

Jeff (24): Jeff plays rugby union in the first division of the National League. He had been brought up in Kenya where his parents had worked as missionaries. He describes himself as being a Christian to varying degrees throughout his life. He has been involved in youth work and described himself as an evangelical Christian.

Ray (28): Up until the age of 21 Ray had been a professional footballer, following this he competed at the semi-professional level. He started going to church as a teenager when his family began to attend. He explained he took responsibility for his faith at the age of 16. He now works as a pastoral assistant for the Anglican church. This includes mostly youth work and some preaching, and he is now exploring the possibility of ordination.

Rachel (19): Rachel plays netball at local club level and rugby union for her university. She explained how she had been brought up in a Christian family. She had made her own commitment to her faith at the age of 14. It was at this time that she began to help with Sunday school. Rachel described herself as a Protestant.

Ryan (23): As well as playing in the national premier league Ryan had also played international hockey. He had not been brought up in a Christian family though had attended Sunday school until he started playing hockey. He explained he had been a Christian for around two and a half years and described himself as a non-denominational Christian.

George (23): George had been involved with international football at schoolboy level and had played professional football. He now plays at non-league level. He had attended churches of many different denominations and explained that, rather than confine himself to a particular denomination, he prefers to attend where he feels most comfortable.

David (32): David plays professional footballer in the Premier League. He had attended Sunday school as a child, but this stopped when he started playing football. He had been a Christian for seven years having made his own decision to commit to the Christian faith in 1999. At present, he attends a Free Methodist church.

Amy (32): Amy had played rugby union from the age of seven and is now playing at international level. Amy had been brought up in a Roman Catholic family which had

attended church. However, she feels she has taken her own path to find her faith and made her own commitment around the age of ten. She described her approach to her faith as an evangelical Roman Catholic.

Gavin (24): Gavin plays professional ice-hockey and competes at the international level. He had been brought up in a Christian home and attended church up until the age of ten. He had attended a Catholic school which he felt had had been a big influence on him. Gavin made his own commitment to his faith in his late teens. He described himself as an Anglican.

Sinead (27): Sinead is an ice hockey player who had represented her country. She had been brought up in a Christian family but explained she had only really taken an interest as a young adult and felt she had truly been a Christian for the last six years. She preferred to describe herself as a non-denominational Christian.

Jessica (24): Jessica plays rugby union at club level. She also helps with the development of younger players. She had been a Christian all her life but felt she had drifted away from church whilst at university. She had now returned to her faith and described herself as an Anglican.

Jill (49): Jill had played cricket and hockey to international standard. She had now retired from both but now has a coaching role with the national cricket team. Jill had been a Christian from the age of 19 and although she now attends an evangelical church, she explained that she does not take an evangelical approach to her faith.

Kyle (28): Kyle had been a professional footballer and is now playing semi-professionally. He had been brought up in a Christian family and had been a Christian all his life. He had been confirmed at the age of 18 but felt he only started living the life of a Christian at around the age of 21. Kyle considered himself an Anglican Catholic who takes an evangelical approach to his faith. He has completed a Christian Correspondence Course and worked as a Parish assistant for a time. He hopes to train as a Priest in the future.

Melanie (54): Although now retired from international tournaments, Melanie had competed in the world championships and been European champion in the sport of field archery. She had been taken to church as a child and explained how she had periods of her life, particularly as a young adult, where she had been less committed to her faith but felt she had always been a Christian. She now attends and plays the organ at a Methodist church.

Alex (26): Alex plays at the highest level of hockey in the national league having previously represented his country at junior level. He had been brought up an Anglican and had made his own commitment to his faith at 18 but now prefers not to attach himself to a particular Christian denomination.

Joshua (42): Joshua had been an international rugby union player and had represented his country at the World Cup. His parents had been missionaries and he had attended church as a child. Joshua has always been a Christian, but his faith has developed over time. He had made a firm commitment to Christianity around the age of 25. He is a member of the Church of England.

Data Collection Procedure

Having recruited my respondents, the success of the study then hinged on the implementation of the appropriate data collection methods to meet with the study's aims and intentions (Bryman, 2016; Silverman, 2020). A key issue in the decision-making process regarding data collection was the adoption of the method which would prove most insightful in terms of respondent experience. Given the qualitative nature of the study and the need to collect data regarding unobservable evidence including respondent beliefs, thoughts and past experiences, interviewing was deemed to best meet the intentions of the research (Bryman, 2016). Qualitative interviewing gathers data through open-ended questioning to gain an understanding of the interviewees' experiences and perceptions and provides a strong instrument to the understanding of others' views and their interpretations of reality (Punch, 2013; Schutt, 2018). This data collection method also met the study's requirements to access the experiences of the sport-Christian interface from a diversity of athletes in terms of gender, sport, ability level and Christian denomination. As a result, it was deemed appropriate, given the aims of the study, to conduct interviews with the athletes and provide them with the opportunity to explain verbally their experiences of combining faith and sport. Whilst not suggesting the interviewing of athletes to be a fool-proof way of researching their experiences as Christian athletes, it was deemed the most appropriate given the intentions of the research.

Having decided upon qualitative interviewing as the method of data collection attention then turned to style with consideration given to structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviews. Structured interviews tend to be associated with quantitative

research (Robson & McCartan, 2016) and have specific set questions which reflect the thoughts of the researcher rather than the respondents (Bryman, 2016). Given the athletes' perspectives were central to the intentions of the research, structured interviews were considered inadequate for providing the rich, nuanced data the research demanded. Consequently, an interview style with a greater degree of flexibility, which encouraged the athletes to express their views and opinions, was required.

Qualitative research, of the type undertaken here, tends to be more inclined to semi-structured or unstructured interviews (Robson & McCartan, 2016). These place the emphasis on the respondent and their understanding of situations and events (Bryman, 2016). This makes for a flexible interview process with the unstructured interview being the most flexible and similar in character to a conversation (Burgess, 2016). That said, a completely unstructured interview, although providing an opportunity for the sport-Christianity interface to be discussed in detail, was considered unsuitable given the need to maintain a degree of focus and capture the nuanced experiences of the athletes as they sought to navigate and negotiate the demands and expectations of competitive sport alongside their Christian worldview. In contrast, the semi-structured interview, although ideally conversational in style, has a clear purpose (Burgess, 2016). Consequently, the intention of the interviews was to conduct a conversation with the athletes within the context of the research question.

Semi-structured interviews allow respondents the freedom to raise a wide range of topics and discuss issues they believe to be relevant and significant (Fontana & Frey, 1998). The attentive researcher is also afforded the opportunity of a further probing,

a skill that encourages respondents to expand on their answers, and the interviewer the opportunity to glean greater detail on a topic (Robson & McCartan, 2016). This encourages a more in-depth examination of interesting points. With this style's flexibility, there is provision to fully explore each respondent's experiences and perspectives and, if the interview requires, a change in emphasis and/or choice and order of questions (Bryman, 2016). These factors all contribute to providing the rich, in-depth, first-hand information from the participants themselves. This interview style therefore appeared the best-fit for conducting the fluid conversations required to gain insight into Christian athletes and their experiences of navigating and negotiating the demands and expectations of competitive sport alongside their faith.

To ensure a comprehensive covering of the experiences of Christian athletes an interview guide was devised (Bryman, 2016). Possible areas for conversation were determined from both the existing literature and the researcher's observations of the sport-Christianity interface whilst also ensuring provision for the emergence of other areas raised by the participants to be explored. This schedule, whilst monitoring the data collected and thereby ensuring the objectives of the research were addressed, allowed for the conversation to flow in the direction of the interviewees' responses. Prior to the commencement of data collection, the interview guide was reviewed with the study's supervisors to ensure appropriate rigour. This was followed by pilot interviews to help identify any potential issues. This proved re-assuring and the interview schedule proved successful both in allowing the interview to take the form of a conversation but also provided, if necessary, a degree of direction to the discussion to ensure the relevant data was collected. At the recruitment stage of the research, it was made clear to the athletes the nature and intentions of the research and who then

gave their individual consent to be a part of the research. Emails were then sent to the respondents to arrange interviews, a process that began in March 2006. Interviews took place between April 2006 and July 2006. The duration of the interviews ranged between 60 and 120 minutes with all being audio-recorded and transcribed in full.

Wherever possible the interviews were conducted in person. Given the geographical spread and time commitments of the respondents this was not always the case. On these occasions, the interviews (which took place before the emergence of video calling/recording) took the form of a telephone conversation and were recorded on audio cassette. Although there were a small number of occasions when there were issues with sound quality, telephone interviewing meant neither the respondents' location nor those with full-time time work or family commitments were excluded from the study. This helped facilitate the wide range of participants required to meet the intentions of the research. When necessary, telephone interviewing can be used productively in qualitative research and can prove as equally effective as a face-to-face interview (Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004).

The initial stages of the of interview focused on information to help contextualise responses at a later stage in the research process, if necessary, such as age and sporting trajectory. Enquiries were then made regarding the history of both the athlete's career and faith. These initial exchanges, on topics familiar to respondents, were intended to both help participants relax in the interview setting and also allay any fears that they may have of taking part in academic research. These initial exchanges, however, were not without significance and often provided useful information. The

interview then proceeded to focus on the main research question and the Christian athletes' experiences of the sport-faith interface. These discussions focused on the links between faith and sport, how they impacted each other and any issues they had experienced and their attempts to resolve them. The open-ended questioning style of the semi-structured approach provided flexibility in the interviews and, if the need arose, aided both the probing and clarification of responses. It also facilitated the interviews to be directed by the responses of the participants and provided for any recurring issues and points of interest raised by respondents to be noted for possible discussion with future participants.

Researcher notes, similar to the memoing in grounded theory (Mills & Birks, 2015), were taken. Note taking began during the interviews when information considered significant to the research came to light was logged, and these notes were embellished immediately on completion of the interviews. These supplementary notes included information such as any interesting issues, recurring themes or possible avenues to pursue (emergent themes) both during the interview being conducted at the time and with other respondents. These notes also served as a useful point of reference in keeping track of ideas and thoughts regarding the data, and the understanding and contextualisation of potential themes. As well as adding to the data regarding each interview, the notes also served as the initial stages of data analysis (Punch, 2013). The pairing of data collection and analysis is important throughout the research process, analysis being an ongoing process with the writing up of any notes (Delamont, 2012). Data analysis was an iterative activity throughout the data collection phase, with constant comparisons being made to assess potential themes. The semi-structured interviews provided for the gathering of rich, comprehensive detail

from the Christian athletes as to their experiences of combining sport and faith and the process proved to be an interesting and insightful experience. Having collected all the data, there was now the need to undertake a comprehensive analysis in order to gain an understanding of the Christian athletes' experiences of the connection between sport and faith.

Data Analysis

For the information gleaned from qualitative research to be most effective, scrutiny of the data must be conducted with proficiency and rigour (Miles & Huberman, 1994). There is the suggestion that this is no easy task given the complexity in analysing qualitative data and a lack of clear guidelines for doing so (Bryman, 2016; Robson & McCartan 2016; Schutt, 2018). The determining factor in the choice of analytical strategy are the intentions of the research (Punch, 2013), and which in the study undertaken here, is to provide an explanatory theory as to how Christian athletes navigate and negotiate the demands and expectations of competitive sport alongside their faith-based activities. This being the case, analysis looked to identify recurring patterns which suggested a thematic analysis of the data. Thematic analysis aims not only to identify themes, which are interesting or important patterns, but also analyse and report on them to address the intentions of the research (Braun & Clark, 2006, 2021). By doing so it extends beyond summarising to interpreting and making sense of the data (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Analysing the data in this way would allow for the identifying of trends in the experiences of Christian athletes but also move beyond this level to examine the underlying concepts to the sport-Christianity interface and so meet the intentions of the research.

The initial stages of the analysis process coincided with data collection. The supplementary notes had identified points of interest in the interviews and helped to identify potential themes which could then be confirmed with further data gathering or, if appropriate, discussed with later interviewees. This ongoing process of analysis and the continual moving between insights and data, as they informed and impacted on each other whilst the research was being conducted, is reminiscent of the iterative process evident in grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The transcribing of each interview was undertaken as soon after the completion of the interview as possible. This allowed for an early familiarisation with the data but also, in the interests of integrity, allowed for a copy of the transcript to be promptly sent to respondents to check for accuracy whilst the interview was still fresh in their minds (Bryman, 2016). Respondents were also given the opportunity to amend, if necessary. This practice commonly referred to as 'respondent validation' or 'member checking' (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019) helped to ensure the validity of the gathered data. Familiarization of the data was enhanced by a repeated listening to the interviews, alongside a reading and re-reading of the transcripts with reference to the supplementary notes. This process provided for a thorough examination of each the athlete's interview.

With the data now taking the form of transcripts and notes, the intention was then to organise it in a meaningful and systematic way to address the research question. It was at this stage that the decision was taken to use MAXQDA, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis program (CAQDAS). This practice is particularly beneficial with the large volumes of data that are generated through the semi-structured interviews (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017; Robson & McCartan, 2016). Computer

analysis software requires the interview transcripts to be looked at on a line-by-line basis and forces in-depth consideration of the text making for a thorough consideration of the data (Robson & McCartan, 2016). The interviews, along with the coded segments, could be stored and organised in a single location and which aided the retrieval of data. It also proved advantageous in that samples of the coded data could be transferred to the supervisors of the study to be checked for consistency. It was with these benefits in mind that the decision to use MAXQDA was taken.

The role of qualitative data analysis software is to assist the researcher in their analysis of the gathered data and, as with manual methods, still requires the analyst to make decisions about both the coding of the gathered data and the interpretation of the findings (Banner & Albarran, 2009; Bringer, Johnson & Brackenbridge, 2006; St. John & Johnston, 2000). Now familiar with the data, I began coding the interviews, a process also evident in grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 1997). This involved a close scrutiny of the data with the purpose of identifying segments that appeared, at this stage, to have potential significance to the athletes' experiences of aligning sport and faith. These sections, which could be individual words, phrases, sentences or paragraphs, were then assigned a code which captured something of their meaning. The intention was for trends to emerge from the interview transcripts, open codes rather than pre-set codes were assigned to the data. These codes could then be developed or modified throughout the process. In practice this caused sections of the interview transcripts which referred to a similar topic being assigned the same code. For example, sport as a 'calling' was often referred to and considered relevant to the aims of the research and the athletes' experiences in the combining faith and sport. These segments of the interview transcripts were assigned the code

‘calling’. Different codes were assigned to distinct parts of the transcripts depending upon content and meaning. This process continued with all the transcripts and generated a range of codes that were subject to continual reflection and revised if necessary. On completion of this process, the segments of data relevant to the different codes were gathered, a task made easier given the decision to use CAQDAS.

It was by studying these codes that initial themes were identified. Through a process of examining the codes in the context of the objectives of the research, those which shared similar ideas and provided insight into the relationship between sport and faith for Christian athletes were grouped together. These formed the basis for potential themes and identified patterns in the data which were relevant to the research question. For example, the code of ‘calling’, highlighted previously, along with others such as ‘behaviour’ and ‘conversations’ appeared to fit with the notion of the athletes sharing their faith. These conceptually-related codes were grouped together and assigned the theme ‘evangelism’. At this stage there was the potential for codes to be associated with more than one theme. This highlighted the need for a closer consideration of the initial themes. This process involved returning to and reading the data associated with each theme to ensure they supported it.

Consideration was also given to whether themes made sense, were distinctive from each other and/or a reflection of the most significant patterns across all interviews. Once again, the value of CAQDAS was evident as it facilitated both the quick and easy retrieval of segments of data but also the modification and development of the themes. Given the limited research into the sport-Christianity interface emphasis was placed on the need to provide thematic descriptions reflecting the whole of the data to provide

insight into the experiences of Christian athletes. This process led to the combining and discarding of themes as well as new themes becoming evident. For example, it was at this stage that 'competition' as a theme emerged from the data, and which was considered significant to the objectives of the research. This was followed by a further refining of the identified themes to ensure the ideas they incorporated were clear and addressed the research question. This process resulted in the identification of four themes. The first theme considers how sport becomes a means of evangelism. The second presents the notion of sport as worship. The third theme examines the place of prayer in sport. The final theme discusses the element of competition for Christian athletes. Having established the themes in the data that best told the story of Christian athletes' experiences of navigating and negotiating the demands and expectations of competitive sport alongside their faith, these were then used to provide the content and structure for the analytical chapters of the study. With the research methods now explained, the discussion moves to issues of academic rigour.

Academic Rigour

For there to be value and meaning in research it is paramount that it is conducted in a rigorous and methodical manner (Attride-Stirling, 2001), rigour being the ways that trust or confidence are established in the findings or results of a research study (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). This is established by evaluating the study and necessitates consideration of any areas of potential bias in the research. The intention, as with any research, is for it to be as objective as possible. That said, as indicated previously, the interpretative nature of the research undertaken here, brings with it potential for the researcher's values to come into play in various instances along

the research process. By addressing the areas of trustworthiness, positionality and ethics the discussion now reveals how confidence was established in the research.

Trustworthiness

It is by proving the trustworthiness of a study that researchers can establish value in their research findings. The process of evaluating qualitative research is less straightforward than quantitative approaches (Rodham, Fox & Doran, 2015) but is a concept that should not be neglected (Tobin & Begley, 2004). Establishing the quality of quantitative research places emphasis on its reliability, the extent to which the outcomes of the research can be replicated, and validity, the integrity of the conclusions drawn from the research. The relevance of these criteria for qualitative research are subject to debate given they point to a degree of measurement, a concept seldom considered in qualitative research (Bryman, 2016). This has led to the adaption of the same criteria (e.g., LeCompte & Goetz, 1982; Kirk & Miller, 1986) but also suggestions of other criteria for establishing the trustworthiness of qualitative research. Lincoln and Guba (1985) identified the criteria of credibility, dependability, transferability and confirmability and it is in meeting with these that the research undertaken sought to establish its trustworthiness. It is therefore pertinent to consider each of these criteria in relation to the research regarding the experiences of Christian athletes in combining faith and sport.

The first of these criteria, credibility, allows others in a comparable situation, through an accurate description or interpretation by the researcher, to recognize the experiences contained within the study (Krefting, 1991). Given the credibility of qualitative research depends on the application and proficiency of those conducting

the study (Golafshani, 2003), this was pursued through a thorough approach to research design (outlined previously). The intention to study the relationship between sport and faith for Christian athletes located the research within the social sciences and with the focus on the lived experiences of these athletes a constructionist, interpretivist approach was adopted. In total, 25 respondents participated in the study and an audit trail provided evidence of the research process. This trail began with the determining of questions prior to the interviews, continued through the audio recording and supplementary notes taken both during and after the interviews and concluded with the transcription of the interviews as soon as possible after their conclusion. This also helps to establish dependability, which is achieved when the research process is logical and clearly outlined (Tobin & Begley, 2004), thus making it possible for another researcher to follow the decision trail used by the researcher (Sandelowski, 1986) and arrive at a similar conclusion (Koch, 1994). This was also achieved by the design of the study specifically addressing the objectives of the research and by selecting semi-structured interviews as the method of data collection. It was further pursued through a rigorous analysis of the data to identify the main themes and ideas that addressed the research question.

Transferability concerns the aspect of applicability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and the extent to which the findings of the study can then be transferred to other respondents in different settings (Nowell, Norris, White & Moules, 2017). Total replication of qualitative research is almost unobtainable given the impossible task of reproducing the exact time, circumstances and participants of the original study (Bryman, 2016). In this study, this was facilitated through the provision of the detailed descriptions of the participants, context and the research process. This enables others to assess

whether the findings are transferable to their own situations and is referred to transferability judgement (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Furthermore, the findings proposed by the research undertaken here can be further assessed through their presence in other disciplines. For example, the theme of prayer and its value as a coping strategy for individuals dealing with stress and anxiety is evident in empirical research in the discipline of psychology. In these instances, the research offers transferable observations for comparison to other areas of study and consequently maintains the relevance of the findings to other contexts.

Confirmability, which can only be established when credibility, transferability, and dependability are all achieved (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), requires the researcher to demonstrate how conclusions and interpretations derived from the data have been reached (Tobin & Begley, 2004). The position of complete neutrality on the researcher's part is impossible and there is a need for them to be self-aware. There is an importance that the researcher acknowledges and reflects upon their position during the collecting, analysing and interpreting of the data (Denzin, 1997; Bryman, 2016). This necessitates a demonstration that any interpretation is clearly grounded in the data and not influenced by personal agendas (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Previous knowledge of the subject and the researcher's own experience is, to a degree, used to engage with and interpret the data (Ginev, 2016). With the importance of the researcher's position in establishing confirmability and thereby the trustworthiness of the research, the discussion moves to address this matter.

Positionality

Given the interpretivist nature of the study there was a need for awareness regarding the researcher's previous knowledge and experience in the area under consideration (Bryman, 2016; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). To highlight the researcher's position Hammersley and Atkinson (2019) explain the possible roles. At one extreme is that of 'complete participant', in which the researcher becomes fully immersed in the field whilst at the other, the 'complete observer' results in the researcher having no contact with those being studied. Within these two extremes lie 'participant as observer', where the researcher fully engages with the respondents, and 'observer as participant', in which the researcher aims to remain neutral and there is some, albeit limited, interaction with the participants. It was the latter of these that came closest to the researcher's position here. My previous academic studies were primarily in the field of sports science, but I came to the research from a lifetime of participation in a host of sports and a close observation of many of its facets both cultural and otherwise. These observations, allied with an interest in and much personal research into faith-spirituality, resulted in a growing awareness of athletes referencing their Christian faith. These athletes appear to have successfully combined a Christian worldview and sport despite some of their expectations appearing to be in conflict. This prompted extensive reading on the relationship between sport and Christianity and it was from this foundation the project emerged.

At the present time, the extent of the primary research into the sport-Christianity interface is scarce. This, allied with the fact that I had no previous engagement in the field of sport and Christianity, helped to eradicate any influence from pre-conceived ideas. Furthermore, in holding an agnostic perspective, I came to the study with a

relatively open mind. This, along with constant reflexivity towards the possible incursions of my values and biases in relation to the research process, enabled me to achieve, as far as is possible, a sense of academic objectivity. A constructionist, interpretivist approach with 'observer as participant' enabled me to engage with respondents and to attempt to understand the meanings behind specific behaviours and interactions within their environment. This allowed for the relationship between sport and Christianity to be interpreted and analysed. Despite the challenges presented by qualitative study, the research undertaken here, was able to fulfil the criterion of confirmability, and so trustworthiness.

Ethical Considerations

In addition to establishing trustworthiness, it is also crucial that research conforms to ethical standards (Janesick, 2003). Ethical clearance for the study was granted by the Research Advisory Ethics Committee at the University of Chester and the design and execution of the research was conducted in accordance with the Statement of Ethical Practice set out by the British Sociological Association (BSA) (2002). As set out in the guidelines, all respondents were informed prior to their participation on the nature of the study. This included information on the aims and intentions of the research to ensure each respondent was aware of how they would be engaged and represented. Furthermore, respondents were also informed of matters regarding the collection, storage and representation of the data. Having outlined the details of the study and addressed any questions, voluntary consent was sought from the respondents, who were all adults over the age of 18, whilst making them aware of their right to withdraw at any time. Every effort was made to ensure the confidentiality and anonymity with the use of pseudonyms in terms of the people and teams included in the research.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined philosophical and methodological groundings of my research into the experiences of how Christian athletes navigate and negotiate the demands and expectations of competitive sport alongside their faith. It has explained how the study is positioned within the social sciences. The reasoning for the adoption of a constructionist ontology and interpretivist epistemologically has been demonstrated as well as the need for rich, nuanced data dictated a qualitative approach which was inductive in nature. The challenges of accessing minority or under-represented groups and the need to use gatekeepers to recruit participants have been addressed. Data collection involved the use of semi-structured interviews, and the preliminary stages of analysis began with the use of computer assisted qualitative data analysis software. This provided the foundation for more in-depth analysis, which looked for themes in the data drawing on some of the principles of grounded theory. This process of research design and implementation outlined here, demonstrates academic rigour was central to the study and that the findings were rooted in the data and not preconceived ideas. The trustworthiness of the research has been addressed by explaining how the study met the requirements of credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability which included recognition of the researcher's position. Finally, consideration has been given to ethical issues. With the practicalities of the research methods explained in detail, the discussion turns to the analysis and evaluation of the data in light of the central research question.

Chapter 5: Sport as Evangelism

Introduction

The thesis so far has reviewed the literature pertaining to the relationship between sport and the Christian faith, paying particular attention to that considered most relevant to the central research question. Building on the consideration of research methods, the discussion now moves to an analysis of the data findings, beginning with the theme of 'Sport as Evangelism'. The chapter commences by highlighting how athletes combined sport and Christianity in relation to notions of evangelism, with many identifying that the opportunity to share faith provided both an extra incentive to participation, but also be the very reason for some athletes' involvement in sport. Others believed they were 'called' to their sport for this very purpose. The discussion then looks to explain how the Christian athletes achieved this goal and notes evidence of both explicit, through a verbal proclamation, and implicit, through action, approaches to evangelism. Through an examination of these two strategies, it becomes evident that the dissemination of the Christian faith through sport is a complex matter given that the demands and expectations of sport often appear to conflict with those of Christianity. Data suggest that athletes sought to share their Christian faith in the sport-related contexts and their experiences of this is also examined. This too identifies challenges for the athletes and leads to a consideration of whether it is the competitive environment or the social culture that surrounds sport that proves most conducive to evangelistic opportunity. The chapter begins by analysing in detail the reasons for athletes witnessing to their faith whilst participating in sport.

Reasons for Sport as Evangelism

The interview data suggested that a significant factor in the relationship between sport and the Christian faith for the majority of respondents was the opportunity their participation in sport provided for evangelism. Indeed, all but one endeavoured to do this, a Christian responsibility which is stressed in the theological literature on mission and evangelism (e.g., Barth, 1956; Bonhoeffer, 1953; Kirk, 1999). The missionary nature of the church, which according to Bosch (1991) is represented by the people of God, stems from Jesus' instructions to the apostles to both witness to and retell his life story and message. In following the example of the apostles, Christians today have a responsibility to become intentionally involved in society to develop relationships with others and represent Christ to them.

It was this sense of duty and responsibility that footballer, Nigel, who described himself as evangelical, was trying to fulfil when playing semi-professional football: "I'm trying to have conversations and share about my faith so it gave me extra reasons to play my football so I could talk to them about God and share my faith". The extra incentive sport provided as an avenue to talk about faith was also articulated by club tennis player and fellow evangelical Christian, Grant:

> Sport is my mission so I'm hoping to witness to other sports players and … help them to understand what Christ has come to do for us all. I've got a chance to be getting alongside other sporty people … in an environment where I can be like Jesus Christ.

Given that both Nigel and Grant described themselves as taking an evangelical approach to their faith, it is perhaps understandable that they see sport as an opportunity to speak to others about Christianity. Furthermore, the opportunity sport offered for evangelism also provided an extra motivation for their participation, Grant going so far as to suggest that it was for this reason that he played tennis. What Nigel and Grant indicate is that sport, and the platform it provides for evangelism, played a key role in their participation. For them, there was an additional reason for their involvement in sport. Whilst it may appear that individuals participate in athletic pursuits for sporting reasons only, Nigel and Grant also viewed sport as an opportunity to fulfil one of the perceived requirements of their faith by using it to spread the Christian message.

This use of sport as a means of evangelism by respondents here concurs with empirical research by Stevenson (1991, 1997). He identified how using sport to share their faith enabled some evangelical athletes to overcome the difficulties they encountered in the dominant culture of elite, competitive sport. As well as being in accordance with, and adding support to, Stevenson's (1991, 1997) findings, respondents here provide evidence that sport as evangelism is present in other cultural contexts. Additionally, unlike their Canadian counterparts, neither Nigel nor Grant competed at the elite level, indicating that evangelism is not restricted to the highest levels of sport and is practiced by athletes of varying abilities.

Furthermore, the instigating factor in sport as evangelism differed significantly between the athletes in Stevenson's (1991, 1997) studies and respondents here. The Canadian athletes were either lapsed Christians or non-Christians who had turned or

returned to the Christian faith, and evangelical Christianity in particular, as a means of dealing with the demands and expectations of competitive sport. In contrast, neither Nigel's nor Grant's participation in sport was the instigator of their faith. Indeed, the reverse was true with faith being a motivating factor to their participation in sport. This suggests that neither an athlete's commitment to the Christian faith, nor the intention to evangelise, are necessarily a consequence of issues they encounter in sport. What the evidence here suggests is that a desire to share the Christian faith can be the driving force behind participation in sport, a finding which offers a new perspective to that of the existing empirical evidence on sport as evangelism. There are differences in the subjects of the those contributing to the research undertaken here and those of Stevenson (1991, 1997) in matters such as cultural background and sporting ability levels which may prove significant in the contrasting findings, but which can only be confirmed through further research. This points to an area of the sport-Christianity dyad which would benefit from additional study to examine the reasons for this disparity.

Additionally, the data indicate that the use of sport as evangelism is not confined to athletes of the evangelical tradition, with evidence of respondents from other Christian traditions also using their participation in sport to witness to their faith. Anglican Ray, who had played both professional and semi-professional football, explained how his participation in sport was not solely about competing:

> I struggle with the fact that sport seems good in itself, I think … it's just a means … to an end rather than … although I'm not sure. … I think sport is an opportunity for evangelism rather than let's just play sport.

Despite not describing himself as evangelical, Ray suggested that he sought to explain his beliefs to his fellow athletes. With the present literature providing little, if any, data from athletes outside the evangelical tradition, Ray provides new insight into sport as evangelism in that it he indicates that the use of sport as an opportunity to spread the message extends to other Christian denominations. Furthermore, Ray reflects what Treat (2015; 2018) suggests is the common perception of sport by Christians. Although advocating for the intrinsic good of sport, a concept Ray does not subscribe to, Treat (2015; 2018) explains how the common view among Christians is that sport is only of value when it is used for spiritual purposes such as evangelism (see also Hoffman, 2010; Krattenmaker, 2010).

Further evidence of sport being used as a means for evangelism outside the evangelical tradition was provided by Protestant Denise, who although not professing an evangelical outlook, indicated the central role evangelism played in her international rowing career:

> Sport is a big part of my life … to me that's where God has put me … that's my area of witness … they're my friends, they're the people that I spend time with … God wants me in the sport.

It seems from Denise's point of view that she feels 'called' to sport for the purpose of sharing the Christian faith. This sense of 'calling' aligns with what Hope (2006) terms a 'specific missionary calling' whereby individual Christians may feel a 'call' to engage with a particular group or community. This is distinct from a 'general call' which applies

to all Christians at all times, and which requires them to witness to their faith whatever the place or circumstances and which may involve pursuits that, initially, do not appear to be associated with religious belief. Jayne, an international long-distance runner, articulated a similar call to the specific environment of sport when discussing the link between running and her faith:

> So, I did see it as, something that God has given me, that I should do my best at … because there weren't very many Christian athletes around. If people who are athletes and were training this hard actually want to know about God, then they haven't really got many opportunities … and actually me being there just gives them the chance to ask the questions they want to ask.

Amy (a rugby union player of international standard), who described herself as evangelical, also discussed how her 'calling' to elite sport helped in her relationship building:

> [Sport] helps me develop my relationships with … non-Christians … to actually be interactive with … and it gives me a chance … to discuss with other people what's important to me and my beliefs … I was definitely called to be … a Christian in a rugby team.

These interview extracts from Denise, Jayne and Amy provide further evidence of the belief that sport, for some Christian athletes, is about more than just participation. Rather, it is the environment through which they meet with non-Christians and the interface through which they can express their faith to others. This provides both the opportunity for them to explain their faith, and for their fellow athletes to ask questions about faith, an opportunity which may not be afforded otherwise. Indeed, all three seem to express the belief that they were 'called' to sport by God for this very reason.

The notion of 'calling' is examined by Null (2008) in his consideration of elite sport as a possible vocation for Christians. In identifying two distinctive approaches by Christian athletes, he explains that the 'driven' athlete finds redemption through their sporting performance and through which they prove their worth to God whilst in contrast, the 'called' athlete recognises that acceptance by God cannot be earned but is unconditional. Null (2008) advocates that it is the 'driven' perspective that aligns with the culture of elite sport and one that tends to be subscribed to by Christian athletes competing at this level. As indicated earlier, the faith of Nigel, Grant and Ray, provided a sense of incentive to their sporting participation. These respondents did not compete to the international standards of Denise, Jayne and Amy, nor did they express a sense of 'calling'. What respondents here suggest is a link between athletic achievement and a sense of 'calling' to sport to share the Christian message. This indicates that for these respondents their 'calling' is not unconditional but that it is something to be earned, coming as a result of their athletic achievements. This being so, respondents here have a perspective that aligns more with Null's (2008) 'driven' approach to explain their participation in sport rather than the 'called' perspective they explicitly articulate. Hence, they provide empirical support to Null's (2008) critique that

it is the sporting abilities of elite Christian athletes rather than God's unconditional acceptance that defines their participation in sport.

Moreover, there appeared to be a link between the level at which athletes competed and their perception of their identity. The culture of elite sport plays a significant role in shaping the identities of athletes which can be based solely on their participation in sport. This can lead to their lives becoming defined by their sport (Coakley, 2016; Overman, 2009). This performance-based identity can prove problematic for Christian athletes, and it is advocated that if sports chaplains are to assist athletes there is a need for them to better understand the norms and expectations of the elite sports culture (Daniels & Parker, 2023; Jones, Parker and Daniels, 2020). The culture of elite sport with its focus on winning, by whatever means, can cause athletes to encounter moral dilemmas which do not sit comfortably with their Christian faith. This has not prevented some evangelical organisations using elite athletes, and those with a high profile in society, to promote the Christian faith, often at the expense of confronting some of sports' more debateable characteristics. It is argued that this has led to an adoption of a performance-based identity by some elite Christian athletes (Daniels & Parker, 2023; Jones, Parker & Daniels, 2020) This perspective enables Christian athletes to navigate the moral dilemmas they encounter in sport by viewing sport as a platform for evangelism. It is a performance-based identity that Denise, Jayne and Amy seem to indicate here and their interpretation of their role as Christian athletes 'called' to the culture of elite sport to share the Christian message appears to provide some justification for their participation in sport.

This sense of ‘calling’ to the sporting environment is not unique to the athletes featured here. Previous research suggests a similar perspective is often adopted by US Christian athletes (Coakley, 2016; Eitzen & Sage, 1993). That said, there is a difference in the foundations to this perspective. Whilst the respondents here based this on the belief that they were placed in their sport for the purposes of evangelism, for the US athletes it was the shared characteristics between sport and the ‘Protestant Work Ethic’ that provided the basis for athletes interpreting their involvement in sport as their ‘calling’ (Eitzen & Sage, 1993). Although the UK athletes, like their US counterparts, indicate a sense of ‘calling’ to sport, they suggest that the reasons for this are not confined to those cited in the existing literature, but extend to the use of sport as evangelism. This represents a difference in the existing research and the first-hand accounts provided by the athletes featured here.

In further considering the responses of Denise, Jayne and Amy, these athletes indicate that their intention was to share their faith with the athletes they play alongside. The existing literature outlines how US Christian sports organisations often look to recruit successful, high-profile athletes to act as faith ‘ambassadors’ to explain the significance of sport with respect to their beliefs and, in doing so, spread the gospel (e.g., Aitken, 1993; Hoffman, 1992a; Krattenmaker, 2010). The anecdotal evidence in this area seems to point to these ‘ambassadors’ declaring their faith to sports fans and spectators. Although UK athletes sought to use sport as an evangelistic mechanism, the data indicate it is with those whom they spend time and develop relationships, namely their team-mates and fellow athletes, that they seek to share the Christian message. Findings then point to the sharing of faith by Christian athletes is not confined to wider audiences.

This apparent contrast in the intended audience for sport as evangelism by US and UK-based athletes may be accounted for by cultural differences. It has been widely argued that the relationship between sport and religion in elite US sport is dominated by evangelical Christianity (Krattenmaker, 2010) where religious practices are a part of the fabric of sport (Hoffman, 2011; Price, 2009). UK athletes compete in a culture with is largely devoid of such practices. Furthermore, respondents here represent a wide range of Christian denominations and ability levels, many of whom do not have the high profile or exposure of their US counterparts and it could be argued that these factors contribute to the differing intended recipients of the Christian message. However, there is a need for further research to bring clarity to this matter.

This section of the discussion has highlighted that for some respondents, involvement in sport went beyond mere participation and became the environment in which they developed their relationships with non-Christians with the intention of communicating their faith. This practice happened across a variety of levels of sport and Christian denominations. Sport as evangelism provided an extra incentive, or even extended to the very reason, for the respondents' participation in sport, with those participating at the elite level expressing the belief that they had been 'called' to sport for the purpose of sharing their faith. Having identified the significance of evangelism for Christian athletes in the combining of faith and sport, the discussion now considers how the athletes approached the sharing of their Christian faith.

Approaches to Sport as Evangelism

Delivering the Christian message through sport, an environment whose goals appear to conflict with those of the Christian faith (Hoffman, 2010), necessitated that individuals looked to the most appropriate means to achieve this. Interview data identified that respondents used different approaches to sport as evangelism. The evidence suggested the use of an explicit sharing of the Christian faith whereby some athletes sought to spread the Christian message in a direct way, openly declaring their faith. Additionally, the data indicated evidence of some respondents adopting a more implicit approach to sport as evangelism. This section sets out to explore these two approaches in detail.

Explicit Evangelism

Evidence of an explicit approach to evangelism was provided by evangelical Christian Nigel, whose faith, as highlighted previously, provided an extra motivation to his participation in semi-professional football:

> So, anyone … who is a Christian and wants to live for Jesus, you want to be … letting other people know about the great news about what He has done for us. There's a very much [a belief] in sport but [also] generally “That's great for you but it's not for me” and one of the things that I like to do … is to challenge that and say, “Well actually this is the absolute truth and a truth that we cannot reject”, It's not alright to say “Oh, it's true but I don't want anything to do with It”.

Likewise, international hockey player and non-denominational Christian Ryan, was eager to let his team-mates know about his faith:

> I'm very open [about my faith]. I like to be teased about being a Christian. I like to put it out there. I like to make them think. So definitely open, for sure … They ask me questions about it now. I've had a few really interesting Christian conversations with them, which have been brilliant.

Both Nigel and Ryan, in displaying their faith were prepared to put themselves in uncomfortable situations in the hope that this would generate a response, of whatever form, from their fellow athletes and an opening from which to challenge them with their Christian message.

What these respondents display is a direct approach to sharing their faith. They engage with the sporting community with the specific intention of proclaiming or speaking about their Christianity, a similar intention noted in both desk-based (Coakley, 2016; Hoffman, 2013) and empirical research (Stevenson, 1991) with elite evangelical athletes. The ultimate aim of these North American evangelical athletes was to encourage others to adopt the Christian faith. The participants in the research undertaken here, represent both evangelical and non-evangelical traditions and compete at varying ability levels, yet still evidence a desire to both share and encourage others to think about the Christian faith. On account of this, they indicate that a direct approach to sport as evangelism extends beyond the boundaries of the existing evidence.

As well as highlighting that an explicit sharing of the Christian faith is not confined to North American evangelical athletes, these findings also provide some indication of the strategies athletes adopt in encouraging others to become Christians. Ryan and Nigel declared their faith with the specific intention of provoking a reaction from their fellow athletes. They then sought to take advantage of any response, whether positive or negative, as an opportunity to discuss and challenge others with their beliefs. Although the use of sport as evangelism is a key area in the literature on the relationship between sport and Christianity (Hoffman, 2013) there appears to be little in-depth consideration of the strategies Christian athletes adopt in their direct attempts at evangelism.

When considering the theological literature, it appears that Ryan and Nigel reflect an approach that is consistent with that of wider notions of evangelism. Abraham (2008), for example, highlights the fact that the term ‘euangelizomai’ means to proclaim or announce and therefore to evangelise means to proclaim or announce the good news of the gospel, good news, which according to Kirk (1999) is inescapably about salvation. This perspective holds the belief that evangelism is not just about engaging with people or communities but having engaged with them there is a need to proclaim or speak about the gospel and thus about challenging people with its message. The key to this interpretation being an explicit sharing of the Christian faith. Costas (2008) and Bevans and Schroeder (2004) are specific in the purpose of evangelism, in that it is more than just a sharing of the Christian message, it calls for others to respond to Jesus’ message and become a part of the community involved in sharing the Christian faith with others. In this sense, Nigel and Ryan, in confronting and challenging their fellow athletes with the Christian message and with the intention of generating a

response, provide some of the first empirical insights into the use of an explicit approach by Christian athletes in seeking to share their faith in competitive sport. Furthermore, these initial insights point to a need for, and provide a foundation to, further research on this matter. Such an explicit approach could, however, prove problematic and it is the concerns and issues it raised for athletes that the discussion now examines.

Anglican Catholic, Kyle, played semi-professional football having previously played professionally. Despite having been a Christian all his life he expressed reservations about adopting a forthright evangelistic approach:

> I started to teach myself about the Bible, that's when I started the Christian Correspondence Course as well. So that's when … it started to build my big relationship with Christ … I got confirmed, I was making more dedication, I wanted to tell everyone about Christ, I wanted to be an evangelist … If you try and … be preaching … sometimes it's not the best thing. You can't just go start preaching … Oh, my word! The thing is they just laugh their arse off, and the thing is with that is, they don't want to hear it.

In contrast to Nigel and Ryan, who were happy to engender any type of response to their Christian beliefs, Kyle was less convinced since it ran the risk of derision of both him and his faith. Similar reservations were also expressed by Alex, a non-denominational Christian, who had played hockey to international standard:

> People don't necessarily want … some people would say religion shoved down their throat. Of course, and I agree with that and why would they? If I met someone on the streets trying to force feed me what they were into, I'd probably reject it.

Evangelical Christian Natalie also expressed concerns regarding an overly explicit approach to sharing her faith in the national basketball league:

> I'm just getting into … knowing when. You know if someone came up to me when I was 22 years old and started going on about God I'd be like "No, thank you very much!" … As a born again sometimes you have that advantage over people who have been Christian all their lives because … you know what the other side of the coin is like.

What each of these respondents suggest is that an excessively enthusiastic approach to proclaiming their faith had the potential to prove detrimental to their attempts at evangelism. They explain a possible impact which, rather than generating interest, may cause a negative reaction from their fellow athletes. Consequently, rather than embracing the Christian message the intended recipients may dismiss it outright. There are parallels with Hoffman's (2011) suggestions based on his observations and anecdotal evidence of how demonstrative prayer gestures intended to bear witness to an athletes' faith have potential to both attract and alienate onlookers. Likewise, the findings presented here offer empirical insight into the negative impact that this approach might have.

An examination of the extant theological literature reveals that respondents reflected the reservations expressed by Bevans and Schroeder (2004) who suggest a direct proclamation may not always be greeted with a positive response, and that those seeking to share their faith may not necessarily be met with enthusiasm. These authors stress the need for proclamation to be an invitation rather than an attempt to impose the Christian faith on others and for the message to be delivered from a position of equality, with respect for the listener. They further advocate that evangelism is about more than just proclamation and stress the importance of appropriate behaviour and actions alongside the verbal delivery of the Christian message. It was the importance of such an awareness that was recognised by some of the respondents in this study. These athletes adopted a much more implicit approach to evangelism, an approach which is now considered in greater detail.

Implicit Evangelism

As highlighted previously, Nigel was eager to confront others with his Christian faith. Though he regarded any response to his evangelistic message as something to be pursued, he also recognised that spreading the Christian message was about more than just a verbal proclamation:

> I mean being a part of an evangelical church I believe that I want to talk to people about my faith as much as I can. Show people that I believe in my actions and in the way I live as well as in conversations and so … a lot of times I will definitely try to speak to people about my faith ... I want people to ask questions, at the end of the day I want them to be interested in God and to …

> become Christians and just be conscious that they can at least enquire about my faith.

Like Nigel, Amy, an international rugby union player who, as evidenced earlier, articulated a 'calling' to her sport, described herself as taking an evangelical approach to her faith. She also explained how she intended her actions to play a part in delivering the Christian message:

> Hopefully, I live my life in such a way that they [teammates] might notice a difference with me and come to ask questions … So, it gives me a chance to answer questions about my faith and … what is the centre of my life.

The potential of adopting a lifestyle that was at variance with their fellow competitors as a way of arousing interest was also adopted by respondents outside the evangelical tradition. In acknowledging his reservations regarding an overly enthusiastic sharing of his faith, Free Methodist and professional footballer David, explained his approach:

> I hope that … if people come to me and say "David, you go to church … What is it about you?" Then I'll gladly share. Would I go in there and … say "You need Jesus in your life?" No, that's wrong of me to do that. If they come to me and they ask me then freely … I'd share.

What these extracts demonstrate is a recognition by these respondents of the significance of their actions as they endeavoured to display their faith to their fellow athletes through their lifestyle behaviours. A similar acknowledgement was

highlighted by Stevenson (1991) with elite evangelical Canadian athletes. The findings of the present study, once again, indicate that this perspective extends beyond the boundaries of both the evangelical tradition but also athletes competing at the elite level.

In recognising the importance of authentic witness when seeking to deliver their Christian message Nigel, Amy and David evidence an implicit evangelistic strategy. As highlighted previously, the strategies used by Christian athletes to share their faith remains an underreported area of study. However, this approach is outlined in the theological literature on evangelism (e.g., Bevans & Schroeder, 2004, Bosch, 2008; Chilcote & Warner, 2008; Newbigin, 2008). This implicit approach places emphasis on behaviour and actions in the initial stages of evangelism. By acting and living in a way that is in accordance with their Christian faith the message is delivered with integrity. The intention behind this strategy is that it leads to potential questions and enquires into the reasons for a lifestyle that differs from others and the potential for conversations to develop which may then lead to a more explicit proclamation of faith. This approach does not seek to foist the Christian message on individuals, but to draw them in with the hope that this will provide the opportunity to discuss faith in more detail. Unlike the explicit evangelistic approach evidenced earlier, this implicit approach, highlights the significance some respondents placed on their behaviour and actions in terms of witness.

On closer inspection of Nigel, Amy and David's interview extracts, each cite examples that predominantly reflect their all-round lifestyles rather than their individual behaviours whilst competing in sport. George, who preferred not to confine himself to

a particular Christian denomination, had played football at the professional level. He recognised the importance of aligning his actions, behaviour and words whilst competing, and acknowledged this was something, on occasion, he had got wrong:

> In terms of being on the pitch … I can still shout at the Referee, I would still get so caught up in the game … I would go into tackles that wee bit harder if somebody wound me up the wrong way … I was no great role model which … is really counter-productive.

Alex, who earlier expressed reservations about taking an overly direct approach to sharing his faith, described a situation which arose whilst playing hockey:

> One of our players ... who has a leadership role inside the club … had a shot which went near the goal, and it was debateable whether or not it crossed the line ... and the Umpire … gave a goal ... and then changed his mind. … This particular player said “Right we’re going off the pitch until you change the decision back. We won’t play. We’ve come all the way to play, and you’re not doing your job. You’ve made a mistake now with this decision.” … I thought it’s the Umpire’s job … to make the decision. It’s the players job to play, and I don’t think that a player can hijack a game, which he tried to do. … So, I basically refused to do it at first … but in the end I caved in and said “OK, fine, I’ll do it for now but I’m not happy with it.” ... But then afterwards we had a discussion about it, ... “I just don’t think that what you did was right because it undermines the authority of the umpires.” … I’m a bit of a sheep really, kind of go along with what other people are doing.

Like Alex, former professional footballer Kyle also expressed concerns with regards to the forceful delivery of the Christian message. Here he outlines a situation whilst playing semi-professional football that he found difficult to negotiate from a Christian perspective:

> I made a mistake. Someone came to watch me … and I got took off [substituted] 'cos … I wasn't having a great game. I was tired and there was someone in the crowd saying, “That's the best place for you … on the bench, you're crap!” And I turned round to him [and said], “Piss off”. I think, it's my friend with her husband and she brought a child … and he'd given me a bit more stick, “Ah, you're crap you are, you wanker!” [So, I said] “Come down here and I'll smack you”. …But what kind of ambassador am I? … I'm a Christian … and I'm threatening to smack people. But I'm thinking that's poor. … I'm representing Christ … as a Christian I'm not doing the cause any good. … As fast as I'm trying to bring people to Christ, I'm scaring people away. … In the bar after the game, the guy came over to me, shook my hand and said it was friendly banter and I shook hands and said, “Yeah, sorry about that mate.” There was no animosity there at all.

It appears that George, Alex and Kyle were of the mind that their Christian faith should influence their attitude when competing. They each indicated that they fully intended to support any verbal declarations of faith with appropriate behaviour. However, this proved challenging and something of a struggle amidst the culture of sport. Despite their best intentions of providing authentic witness, by playing in a manner which they

believed reflected their faith, they found it difficult to withstand the demands and expectations of competitive sport. In effect, rather than add credence to their words through their actions, these respondents found themselves adopting practices and behaviours that could be seen to conflict with their faith-based values. This had the potential to cause their words to lack integrity, and as a result, to compromise their attempts at evangelism.

What these data indicate is that respondents experienced a tension between fulfilling the roles of both athlete and Christian simultaneously. Put simply, at times, their sport demanded actions and behaviours which conflicted with those they wanted to display in their attempts to present the Christian message with integrity. This inherent conflict appeared to result in respondents switching off from being Christians whilst competing to meet the demands and expectations of the performance orientated, win-at-all-costs culture of sport. This could give the impression that they prioritised their sport over their faith, which brings with it the potential to compromise and even undermine their attempts to evangelize. Furthermore, it appears that Alex and Kyle both attempted to resolve the situation by taking the opportunity to discuss their reactions to events on the field of play in post-game social contexts. It appears that once the sporting event was over these respondents re-engaged with their perceived requirements of their faith and therefore their identity as Christians. What Alex and Kyle indicate is that they found it easier to express and act in accordance with their faith in a social context over that of a competitive situation. This points to possible tensions between competitive and non-competitive sporting situations which can cause athletes to display conflicting behaviours depending on the circumstances. It seems that respondents chose the

situations in which they engaged with their faith. In effect they switched their faith on and off depending on the demands and expectations of their environment.

A similar decision to disengage from their faith was noted by Stevenson (1991) in his research with a group of Western Canadian elite evangelical athletes. In examining the ways in which elite Christian athletes juxtapose the two roles of Christian and athlete, Stevenson (1991) identified how some athletes chose to keep these roles, whether by choice or ignorance, separate and when participating in sport prioritised that of athlete. The present findings develop those of Stevenson (1991) by illustrating that the practice of disengaging from faith to meet the demands and expectations of sport extends to other cultures, ability levels and Christian denominations. For the respondents featured here, the occasions when they disengaged from their faith and behaved in ways that failed to support their values and beliefs brought the risk of undermining the Christian message they sought to deliver. Furthermore, inconsistencies in their behaviours had the potential to present a confusing message to their team-mates and act as a detriment to their attempts to evangelize through sport. With the data indicating that in addition to a competitive environment respondents could also seek to share their Christian faith through the social occasions that came with their sport, the discussion now moves to consider this environment in more detail.

Evangelism in a Social Environments Associated with Sport

As we have seen, as part of their participation in sport respondents explained how they socialised with their fellow athletes. Alex and Kyle were not alone in viewing the social situations attached to their sporting ventures as opportunities for evangelism.

Neil highlighted his attitude to the social aspects of professional cricket and the opportunities it provided to proclaim his faith:

> Sport is so social and … when you're in a team with other guys you get very close to them. You spend so much time together, you know each other inside out and you go through rough and smooth with each other ... and that often, for me, brings a lot of opportunities to speak about things. I let people know if I'm going to church, I let people know that I'm going to cell group or I let people know that I read my Bible. I wouldn't say I've got something else on … every chance I get … in a natural way … I try and say and that often brings up conversations.

In addition to playing rugby union at university Rachel spent time in a social context with her fellow players, an environment which encouraged her to share her faith:

> I have the opportunity to influence other people through my sport, which includes the social aspect … in times like rugby weekends away. We're such a tight team and I really enjoy the banter. It also gives others something to think about, having someone with faith in the team.

Jack, who preferred not to categorise his Christian beliefs, believed the individual sport of triathlon afforded him similar advantages:

> Triathlon is a minority sport and the community of triathlon is relatively small, this gives me more chance to be sociable with the other triathletes. Say, if I'm

> leaving an event early to go to church or something, this can promote a discussion with them, and the conversation can get round to God.

Neil, Rachel and Jack cite social contexts when discussing the sharing of their faith through sport. What the data indicate is that a significant factor in them revealing their faith was the quality of the relationships they developed with their fellow athletes. It seems that, in contrast to the competitive context where time spent with others was focused entirely on the pursuit of success, the social side of sport provided more time to foster closer relationships and the opportunity to discuss other aspects of their lives. What respondents suggest is that the time they spent with their fellow athletes in a non-competitive environment enabled them to feel more comfortable in both witnessing to and proclaiming their faith.

That said, the social environment presented its own challenges. Indeed, some respondents found these contexts difficult to negotiate when it came to explaining their Christian faith. For Ray, who as indicated previously, viewed sport as a clear opportunity for evangelism, the social side of professional football was as equally demanding as the competitive side when attempting to share faith:

> You'll see worldly, godless, pagan things … there's a big culture … of the kind of sex and fame of professional footballers, there's quite a bit of money to be … made to various degrees and … women are a big attraction particularly in a male environment and the … kind of jokes, places that people go.

Ray was not alone in experiencing such barriers. Whilst finding it relatively easy to align his actions and his faith during post-match social gatherings, Kyle found the overall culture of football challenging not only from the perspective of trying to share his faith but also in terms of distancing himself from an environment that offered many temptations:

> The football culture is quite difficult. You're looking at … heavy pornography, heavy drinking, heavy gambling. We had a couple of gangsters, … you'd get as much cocaine off … them as you want. So, when you're in that environment … all … that vice sometimes it's easy to get caught into it, … led astray. … I obviously don't take drugs and all that kind of stuff, … it's just the being around that sort of people. It is fun being around them and that sort of fast life. Then it's hard to try and separate yourself from it because you've got to be in the world but not part of it. You've got to be with them and try and get in … a little bit of Christianity … It's very hard to be a Christian.

In turn, it was the social side of national league hockey that non-denominational Christian Ryan outlined and into which he sought to explain his faith:

> Sports … involved with gambling and drink and social…well, partying and crazy stuff like that. … People are talking about certain things … a classic one would be in the age of mobile video phones guys showing photos of their naked girlfriends around the team or guys wanting to get involved with loads of girls and stuff when we go out.

Ray, Kyle and Ryan provide insight into the social contexts that surround sport. They outline a culture where behaviours such as the consumption of alcohol, gambling, the use of expletives and the insensitive treatment of others were at odds with their Christian faith. As athletes, these respondents were expected to engage in similar behaviours. Like the competitive environment, this too could present obstacles to the living out and the sharing of their faith. The initial challenge they faced was to overcome the temptations and distractions they themselves faced in being a part of this culture and having done so, they were then faced with the problem of how to deliver a faith message in an environment antithetical to the values they hoped to share. The experiences they relay indicate that in social contexts, regardless of the sport, these respondents encountered similar kinds of difficulties and dilemmas which arose on a recurring basis.

International rugby union player and evangelical Christian Amy provided insight into the reasons the social environment could prove easier to navigate when delivering the Christian message:

> Sometimes I've got it wrong [laughs] and I've learned by my mistakes. Sometimes I've got very close to getting it wrong and … good friends … have reminded me … asked me a timely question and I've kind of corrected myself or in some situations … I've been able to think about the situation beforehand and prepare. … If someone asks you … "Why aren't you going to get plastered drunk this evening?" I've already prepared an answer that doesn't sound Bible bashing, pious kind of Christian easy answer. … I can give an honest answer to what I want to do rather than going, "Oh, I don't know, I'll … drink 15 pints instead".

For Amy, there were a number of factors that contributed to her being more likely to behave in a manner which reflected her faith in a social environment rather than in a competitive one. As well as being able to draw on previous experience, she indicated there were people with whom she socialised who helped her in these situations. Moreover, she also suggested that, rather than the instinctive response demanded in the unpredictable environment of competitive sport, there were some instances which she was able to reflect on beforehand and so prepare her response. Rather than get drawn into the culture of the sporting social context, this enabled her to respond in a manner that reflected her faith and so align her actions with her words.

What the data suggest is that respondents found the social context, rather than the competitive one, more conducive to explaining and sharing their faith. With the tensions they experienced between trying to meet the demands of both their sport, with its focus on success, and their faith no longer present, respondents were more able to concentrate on evangelism. In the social contexts, despite its many temptations and distractions athletes were more able to align their actions with their values and so deliver the Christian message with integrity. However, to develop understanding of this context there is a need for research into the experiences of Christian athletes in the social culture surrounding competitive sport.

What seems to be happening here is that respondents sought to overcome and reconcile the issues they encountered in the competitive environment by relocating their attempts to share their faith to the opportunities that came socially through their participation in sport. A social context, divorced from the winning orientated culture of

sport, proved a less threatening and safer environment for athletes to align their actions with their words and more likely to lead to the possible discussions they sought regarding their faith. This enabled them to meet both the demands of their sport and pursue success whilst competing but also meet their perceived expectations of their faith by sharing the Christian message with the fellow athletes in the social environments attached to their sport. This caused a relocation of sport as evangelism away from a competitive context to the social environments of sport.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the notion of sport as evangelism based on the first-hand experiences of respondents. It has been suggested that involvement in sport for some Christian athletes extends beyond the act of participation to the opportunity it provides for them to share their faith. For some, this could provide an extra incentive to their competitive involvement whilst for others it was the very reason for their playing sport. Some athletes, most notably those competing at the elite level, articulated a sense of 'calling' to their sport for the specific purpose of spreading the Christian message. Athletes adopted different approaches to share their faith. Some indicated an explicit approach by engaging with the sporting community with the direct intention of proclaiming or speaking about their faith and of confronting their fellow athletes with the Christian message. This approach, however, did not always sit comfortably with some respondents expressing concerns that this could prove detrimental to sport as evangelism. Other respondents adopted a more implicit approach with their actions playing a role in their delivery of their faith. These athletes stressed the need to align their behaviour with their words if their message was to be delivered with integrity. By behaving in a manner consistent with their beliefs, and potentially in contrast to their

fellow athletes, respondents hoped to generate questions and opportunities to discuss their faith in more detail. This implicit approach fit more comfortably from a lifestyle perspective but in a competitive environment, where demands and expectations could conflict with those of their faith, aligning words with actions could prove challenging. Despite their best intentions, the data indicate that this conflict usually resulted in the requirements of sport taking precedence over those of faith. This brought a potential detrimental impact on their delivery of the Christian message. The data also indicated that respondents took the opportunity provided by the social contexts that came with their sport to explain their beliefs. Despite presenting its own challenges this context could be conducive to athletes delivering the Christian message with integrity. Athletes were more comfortable in this context given the opportunities it provided to foster closer relationships, time to reflect on their responses, which could be to recurring issues, but also focus on meeting their perceived demands of their faith. This being the case, what the data indicate was that to overcome the issues they encountered in the competitive environment respondents could relocate their attempts to share their faith to the opportunities that came socially through their participation in sport. This facilitated both the winning expectations of sport but also the sharing the Christian message.

What the primary data here has served to indicate is that, in line with the existing predominantly secondary source research, Christian athletes do use sport as a means of evangelism. Furthermore, it has gone beyond this to provide a more in-depth consideration of this key area in the relationship between sport and the Christian faith. It has identified how Christian athletes, in line with the theological literature, adopt both explicit and implicit approaches to sharing their faith. Subsequently, it has contributed

some of the first insights into the strategies Christian athletes adopt to sport as evangelism. Given these are initial findings to these strategies, it has suggested a need for further research to develop understanding in this area. It has identified apparent differences in the findings here and the existing literature into the reasons Christian athletes feel 'called' to sport and the intended recipients of sport as evangelism, the result of which has been to point to a need for additional study to establish greater clarity in these areas. Furthermore, in highlighting how Christian athletes find the social contexts that come with their sport as being more conducive to sport as evangelism, it has proposed possible reasons for this. These included the quality of the relationships the athletes develop in these environments and the nature of the issues they encounter. These suggestions have led to call for further research into this aspect of the sport-Christianity interface. It is from these perspectives that the findings have contributed to the existing debates concerning sport as evangelism and in doing so extends the research in this area. Having explored how the respondents shared their faith through sport as a way of navigating and negotiating the demands and expectations of competitive sport alongside their Christian worldview the forthcoming chapter seeks to examine another area of this relationship, that of sport and worship.

Chapter 6: Sport as Worship

Introduction

Confirming and expanding upon one of the key issues in the extant literature, the previous chapter has examined the way in which respondents found themselves in a process of continual personal re-negotiation over the relationship between the competitive nature of their sporting pursuits and their Christian world view given their intention to spread the Christian message whilst participating in sport. In addition to respondents connecting sport and faith by viewing sport as an opportunity for evangelism, analysis of the interview data indicated that these interactions were further established through the perception of sport as an opportunity for worship. It is this notion of sport as worship that the discussion now turns. The chapter begins by focusing attention on what is understood by the term 'worship'. This is followed by an examination of this understanding in relation to sport and identifies a style of worship practiced by respondents that differed markedly from traditional corporate worship. The investigation of this alternative interpretation of worship is based on three main themes of 'Everything is Worship', 'Using God given Gifts' and 'Giving One's Best', each of which is explored in detail. What transpires is that respondents encountered tensions in their pursuit of worshipping through sport and these are discussed, along with their attempts to resolve them. The chapter concludes that in sport as worship, sport remains largely untouched, and it is the nature of worship that is adapted to meet the demands and expectations of sport.

Worship

An examination of the notion of sport as worship initially necessitates a consideration of the term ‘worship’, which is not easily defined (Carson, 2002; Johansen, 1970; White, 2000). Worship is derived from the Old English word ‘weorthscipe’, a term which signifies assigning worth, respect or honour to someone (Forrester, McDonald & Tellini,1996; Treat, 2015, 2018; White, 1997). Worship is a peoples’ response to God resulting in the glorification of God, a glorification which asserts God’s sovereignty and recognises God’s presence with a sense of wonder (Ellis & Weir, 2020). In a traditional sense it refers to a communal meeting of individuals to express worship through repetitive actions usually identified as rituals (Ellis & Weir, 2020; Richardson, 1983b). It is this coming together for corporate gatherings which is one of the best ways of explaining Christian worship to an outside observer (White, 2000) and results in a description of the outward and visible signs of worship such as prayer, creeds and affirmations of faith, music, ritual, art and architecture. This represents a ‘narrower’ definition of worship (Davies, 1994), or intensive liturgy (Benson, 2013). This is distinctive from personal devotion, which takes place away from the physical presence of the rest of the body of Christ, the pace and content of which is determined by the individual concerned (White, 2018). This encourages a more intimate approach to the act of devotion that embraces all aspects of a Christian’s life and represents a ‘wider’ definition of worship (Davies, 1994) or extensive liturgy (Benson, 2013). This interpretation considers pursuits, which are not always regarded as spiritual, to have sacramental value. In this view, worship is not confined to a particular time or place, but the whole of one’s life, both work and play (e.g., Earey, 1995, Ellis, 2009; Forrester, McDonald & Tellini, 1996) and can take the form of any activity (e.g., Benson, 2013;

Davies, 1994; White, 2018). It is with these definitions of worship in mind that its relationship with sport is now considered.

Sport and Worship

In the previous chapter we saw how respondents could, in seeking to meet the expectations they perceived to come with their Christian faith, use their sporting contexts as an opportunity for evangelism with the intention of sharing the Christian message with their fellow athletes. If respondents were to achieve this and adhere to their faith-based responsibilities (as they saw them), there was a need for them build relationships with those around them and this was relatively straight forward through their sporting participation. However, where worship was concerned things were slightly more problematic. For example, all athletes articulated that they had often experienced clashes between the timing of their sporting pursuits (i.e., training and competing) and church-based activities. This was particularly so with worship, which, traditionally took place on a Sunday, the day on which many athletes competed.

In his critique of sports chaplaincy in the US, Linville (2016) has argued for greater levels of support to be provided for elite athletes in their search for traditional forms of worship amidst the unpredictability of their transient lives and lifestyles. Likewise, respondents in the present study highlighted how they were often compelled to decide between corporate worship and their sporting lives. International athlete Amy, an evangelical Roman Catholic, outlined the internal conflict she experienced in this area. Here she explains how she constantly scrutinised and revisited her decision to play her sport rather than attend worship:

> Rugby is predominantly … played on Sunday afternoons and so that meant for me - throughout my teenage years when I was developing my own personal faith and also my rugby career was developing - I was having to struggle between [thinking] should I go to church on Sunday or should I go and play rugby? So, I … struggled with that for quite a bit. In fact, it just consistently felt that I was ducking out of [church] … But in many ways, if I hadn't played on a Sunday afternoon, I would never have played at all.

Unlike Amy, evangelical Grant, although experiencing difficulties around the timings of tennis matches and attendance at church, did not appear to question his decision to play for his club:

> It can be a struggle when matches are at weekends and then I can become disconnected from other Christians by not being able to be involved in corporate worship. It's easier in the summer when I can be involved. In the winter there are odd weekends when I can go to church.

Ryan, a non-denominational Christian, advocated it to be God's will that he played in the national hockey league:

> My attendance on Sunday is definitely limited due to the hockey season and that's usually between September and December and then February 'til April. Between those times I'm pretty much committed to playing hockey on Sundays because I think that's where God wants me to be. For the rest of the year, I'm pretty much committed to going to church on Sundays. I don't go to church on

> a Sunday for at least six months, probably six months of the year or more, and that is hard because I don't have the relationships there, I don't have people supporting me and I miss the Word on the weekend and the worship and for me, that's massive - I love going to church.

The interview extracts provided by Amy, Grant and Ryan indicate that a clash between the timings of their sport and corporate worship necessitated a negotiation between their perceived requirements as Christians to worship and those as athletes to participate in sport. In seeking a resolution to this conflict, they indicated they attended corporate worship on the occasions when they were free of sporting commitments. This enabled them to meet their perceived responsibilities to both sport and faith. The data here suggest that it was their participation in sport that dictated to their attendance at corporate worship.

What respondents demonstrate here is a different perspective to the congruence suggested to exist between corporate worship and everyday living (Ellis and Weir, 2018). In examining if an athlete's participation in sport can be construed as a form of worship, Ellis and Weir (2018) consider the relationship between Sunday worship and a worshipful life. They suggest that corporate worship enables the rehearsal of everyday Christian living and provides an opportunity to learn to forgive and be thankful, and to practice the attitudes and intentions of faith. Furthermore, corporate worship enables Christians to offer their whole existence in everyday life to God. This is then lived out through activities beyond the confines of the church building through the offering of every aspect of life to God. This leads Ellis and Weir (2018) to suggest that there exists a harmonious relationship between corporate worship and everyday

Christian living, including sport. However, rather than experiencing any congruence between Sunday worship and sport, UK respondents found themselves encountering tensions in the respective requirements of sport and faith and appeared to face a situation that required their physical presence at sporting events and occasions of worship simultaneously. In this regard, respondent experiences were more akin to those explained by Linville (2016) who highlighted the struggle US Christian athletes have with participation in sport and church attendance and so indicating these struggles extend beyond the US context and not just for athletes competing at the elite level. With their attendance at either activity demonstrating a sense of commitment, Linville (2016) argues that in choosing to participate in sport rather than attend traditional worship Christian athletes, such as the respondents in the present study, run the risk of indicating that sport was their god and faith was a secondary concern.

With respondents indicating that they routinely experienced a clash of timing between sport and corporate worship and therefore only able to physically attend one activity, they did not articulate the opportunity to practice everyday Christian living, which as we have seen, Ellis and Weir (2020) suggest is provided by corporate worship and which then assists Christians live out their faith and worship through all aspects of life. Rather than the suggested compatibility, what Amy, Grant and Ryan indicate a tension between sport and corporate worship which caused them to have to choose between physical participation in one or the other. This is not to suggest there is a lack of compatibility between corporate worship and sport. However, with respondents only able to participate in one or the other, it is difficult to establish if the same congruence between corporate worship and worshipping through sport exists for athletes in the present study. The apparent lack of clarity on this suggests the need for further

consideration of the relationship between corporate worship and participation in sport. Furthermore, it supports Linville's (2016) call for greater consideration to be given to the needs of Christian athletes in facilitating their attendance at the more traditional forms of worship. This would provide the opportunity for Christian athletes to experience the benefits it affords them in living out and worshipping through their everyday lives as Christians which, for athletes of faith, includes sport[4].

Amy's explanation for choosing to play rugby union suggests that rather than making a choice between sport and faith, the decision she made was on different grounds: "I was the only Christian in my team and if I didn't go and play rugby there'd be nobody else who would be a potential witness to them. So that's why I kept playing". What Amy suggests was that the choice she made, rather than being between sport and faith, was based solely on what she perceived to be the responsibilities of her faith. She indicates that, as a Christian, her need to share the Christian message with others, was the over-riding factor in her decision to play rugby. For Amy, her participation in sport, although not necessarily apparent to others, is an expression of her religious beliefs. As a result, her playing rugby appears to be non-negotiable as it enables her to fulfil the Christian mandate to share her faith. Although this decision has the potential to give the impression that Amy is choosing sport over faith, she indicates her choice of sport over corporate worship is more subtle. This decision means that Amy's participation in and commitment to sport remains unchanged. She is still able to meet the demands and expectations of rugby union by participating in

[4] Since data collection there has been a move by some churches in the UK to adopt a model of worship whereby those participating in sport on a Sunday are able to attend corporate worship later in the day.

matches and, in being unable to attend traditional worship, she meets her perceived responsibility as a Christian to worship through her participation in sport.

Within all of this, the central issue for Amy, Grant and Ryan lay with forgoing their attendance at corporate worship rather than competing on a Sunday. Historically, much attention has been drawn to the Scottish athlete and Christian missionary Eric Liddell who, having been selected to compete in the 100 metres at the 1924 Paris Olympics faced the prospect of competing on a Sunday. With the qualifying event scheduled for the Christian Sabbath, Liddell chooses not to compete, a story that has since been portrayed in the film Chariots of Fire (see Cashmore, 2008; Keddie, 2007; Preece, 2009; Watson, 2007a). In more recent times, Jonathan Edwards, the former triple-jump Olympic champion and world record holder, has been compared to Liddell (Folley, 2001). Edwards chose not to compete in the UK athletic trials which took place in Birmingham on Sunday 7th August 1988 for the Seoul Olympics. However, later in his career Edwards changed his stance on competing on Sundays, having read Bible verse Romans 14:15 which states that, “one man considers one day more sacred than the other; another man considers everyday alike”. Following his retirement from athletics, Edwards would later renounce his faith.

The data presented here indicates that such issues did not concern respondents with none of them expressing any difficulties with competing on Sundays. Rather their actions reinforce Ellis (2012, 2014) observations on the changing nature of the Sunday activities in the UK. Sunday sport, frowned on in the past by church leaders, now receives little condemnation and it is not uncommon for it to be embraced, particularly where there is potential for outreach. It is from these observations, along with the

findings from his qualitative study with both athletes and spectators, that Ellis (2012, 2014) advocates how Sunday has undergone cultural change. Indeed, it is this cultural change that Amy, Grant and Ryan appear to reflect. They express no reservations as to participating in sport on Sundays. As Christians, they were potentially likely to resist competing on a Sunday, yet they appear to embrace this societal change. With sport and communal worship often occurring simultaneously, and respondents unable to be physically present at both, the discussion now turns to how this matter was resolved.

Sport as Worship

Having highlighted the tensions athletes faced in both attending corporate worship and participating in sport, the data indicates that some respondents could seek to meet the responsibility they felt as Christians to worship through their participation in sport. This is explained by Amy, who, as indicated, had wrestled with her decision to play rugby rather than attend corporate worship. She offered her take on sport as worship: “It is OK to play on Sundays because if playing sport is where you worship God, then you’re worshipping Him just not in a church building.” Amy’s interpretation of worship through sport displays vestiges of the very origins of sport. Athletic pursuits were conceived to serve as a religious ritual with participants offering worship to please the gods (see, Baker, 1988, 2007; Brasch, 1970; Guttmann, 1978/2004). It seems for Amy that the purpose of sport has come full-circle and rather than participating for reasons such as health, improving her skills and to compete, she alludes to participating for reasons associated with religious belief.

A similar perspective was shared by other respondents. Ryan expressed this clearly: “Massively an act, 100% an act of worship … my reason for playing sport is to honour

God … I definitely see … a fundamental link between praising God and playing sport." George, who had attended churches of many different denominations, articulated a similar view:

> I think that definitely, that sport … played for God is worship … being involved in the professional football environment was an act of worship for me … everyday I went in there I knew I had sort of a higher goal.

As we have seen, there is evidence in the extant literature that sport as worship is a view that is routinely adopted by modern-day Christian athletes. For example, Ellis and Weir (2020) sought to establish whether an athlete's intention to glorify God through sport could be construed as a form of worship. They examined what is meant by 'worship' from different perspectives including: the nature of worship; key biblical and theological ideas of worship; the relationship between worship and sacred times and spaces; and the link between worship and everyday living. Drawing on their analysis of 120 interviews with elite evangelical Christian athletes to discuss the relationship between their Christian faith and their sport, Ellis and Weir (2020) conclude that the concept of giving glory to God is at the core of many elite Christian athletes' beliefs regarding their participation in sport.

The use of sport as worship has been noted previously by Stevenson (1997). He sought to understand how elite Christian athletes negotiated the demands and expectations of the dominant culture of elite competitive sport. Following his analysis of in-depth interviews with 31 elite evangelical athletes, Stevenson (1997) identified a number of problem areas including the overwhelming priority given to winning, the

pressure of maintaining social status, the expectations surrounding Christian athlete relationships with their team, coach and opponents, and the expectations others had of them. Stevenson (1997) suggests that these problems manifested themselves in terms of personal crisis, either as athletes attempted to live up to the demands of competitive sport, or as they began to question the meaning of their participation in sport. Stevenson (1997) concludes that one of the strategies the elite evangelical athletes adopt to resolve these issues is to worship through their participation in sport. Others have noted the use of sport as worship by North American elite evangelical Christian athletes (see, for example, Aitken, 1993; Coakley, 2016; Hoffman, 1992a, 2010; Prebish, 1993a), the suggestion being that it is the intensity with which athletes compete which is a key factor in determining the value of a sporting performance as a spiritual offering. By competing with intensity, athletes evidence their love for, and thankfulness to, God. Sport, which can be perceived as a self-focused and self-indulgent activity, can cause athletes to question the value and meaning of sport which they seek to overcome by viewing sport as an opportunity to worship and for the glory of God. In representing different Christian denominations and a range of sporting abilities, Amy, Ryan and George indicate that sport as worship is more widespread than suggested by the existing evidence.

The examples provided by Amy, Ryan and George were indicative of the view held by all but one respondent and who relocated their worship away from the confines of church buildings to the sporting arena, the outcome of which was that sport took on a degree of spiritual significance. This interpretation of worship differed markedly from the more traditional approach as Alex, a non-denominational Christian, explained:

> I believe that every time I step on the pitch, it's as much a religious act as going to church is. … So, when I go on the pitch, I'm saying … I'm not saying it in words … effectively I want my behaviour on the pitch, the way I play, the way I treat the officials, the way I treat my team-mates and the opposition, all of those things together should say that I'm worshipping God. What that means for me is working extremely hard, so in hockey, working off the ball really hard and closing down people. Well, in training it means being the last one to leave, it means being the first one there, it means training really hard.

Key to Alex seeing his sporting participation as a form of worship was the manner in which he participated and competed. Similarly, it was in his struggles to worship though sport that George highlights his behaviour as being significant to worship when playing professional football:

> In terms of an act of worship I really think that's how sport should be … but it's probably not the way it was. … Maybe I'd tackle harder than I should, shout at the referee, shout at the opposing players or do things that … I thought God wouldn't want me to do.

One might consider the style of Alex and George's worship through sport as indistinguishable from the way many participants approach their sport and the standards they would expect of themselves and others. However, Alex and George interpret the playing of sport in a way that is morally and ethically appropriate as worship. It was faith, and specifically worship, that underwent change whilst sport remained untouched. With Alex and George's worship appearing to morph into the

sports of hockey and football respectively, they reinforce and provide empirical support to Hoffman's (1992a) observations that by focusing on both the intentions behind their involvement and the character they display, athletes can reconfigure virtually any sport, regardless of its nature, as a sacred act. Hoffman (1992a) suggests that it was post-reformation Calvinism that broadened the range of Christian worship and allowed everyday tasks and creative pursuits to be dedicated as tokens of worship (i.e., worshippers became present in the worship rather than simply recipients of priest-led worship). This led to a more personalised form of worship which Hoffman (1992a) advocates is at the centre of sport being considered an act of worship.

The interview extracts provided by Alex and George establish evidence of sport as worship in much the same way as Ellis and Weir (2020) suggest in their empirical research to determine whether an athlete's intention to glorify God through sport can be construed as a form of worship (see previously). They argue that in interpreting worship through sport, elite evangelical athletes showed a commitment to its ethics which would be evidenced in their behaviour and the manner they competed, this necessitates athletes kept to the rules and did not adopt practices that would breech moral standards. It was also important that a level of respect was met, both during and following their sport, for those involved such as their team-mates, opponents and the officials, but which also extended to the spectators. A similar belief is outlined by Smith (2018), an employee of Athletes in Action, an evangelical para-church organisation in the US, helping Christians practically apply faith to sport. He draws on his experiences as an athlete and coach working with elite athletes to discuss the concept of glorifying God. Smith (2018) advocates sport as worship goes beyond trying one's best and giving credit to God for a favourable outcome and of far greater

significance to God is how athletes behave and conduct themselves and the relationships they develop through sport. Although both Alex and George suggest the significance of their behaviour in their intention to worship through sport, neither articulated an evangelical approach to their faith. What these respondents indicate is that an ethical dimension to sport as worship goes beyond the Christian denominations evidenced in the existing research.

The consideration of sport as worship undertaken in this section indicates that respondents' interpretation of worship differs markedly from the traditional view signified by a coming together of individuals to express worship through rituals such as prayer, creeds and singing (Ellis & Weir, 2020; Richardson, 1983b). Rather, their interpretation of worship bore a closer resemblance to White's (2000) description of personal devotion, which he suggests is distinct from the common worship offered by a gathered congregation. This is worship that takes place privately with many of its features such as pace, content, shape and form being determined by the individual. By adopting this interpretation, respondents overcame the tensions between sport and corporate worship by worshipping whilst participating in sport, a practice which goes back to the origins of sport. For respondents, and consistent with the existing literature (Ellis & Weir, 2020; Smith, 2018), this could mean competing in a manner which expressed their faith, and which was reflected in their behaviours and attitudes. By no longer needing to forgo worship to play sport athletes were able to negotiate the requirements of both faith and sport. In worshipping through a less traditional approach they appeared better able to rationalise their choice to compete. In this sense worship became almost indistinguishable from sport, the manifestations of which the discussion now explores.

Manifesting Sport as Worship

Further analysis of the interview data identified three main themes that described the way that sport manifested as worship in respondents' everyday lives, namely: (i) 'Everything is Worship'; (ii) 'Using God Given Gifts' and (iii) 'Giving One's Best'. What follows is an exploration and analysis of each of these themes.

Everything is Worship

As highlighted in the previous section, some respondents expressed the view that worship was not and should not be limited to corporate worship on Sundays and that their whole existence should be lived as an act of worship. Jessica, an Anglican, provided an explanation:

> I don't think that your spiritual life and your normal life are separate. I think everything you do is … an act of worship. As a Christian if you've given your life to God then everything you do is in worship and thanks to him.

A similar perspective is outlined by evangelical Christian Michelle, who prior to representing her university at football had played cricket to county standard:

> Only in the same way that obviously everything is. I wouldn't say it's different to me doing a course or whatever, but I mean … God's sort of the basis and everything you do is spiritual because it matters because he cares about it. I'd say definitely … everything and anything is worship.

International runner Jayne, who considered herself non-denominational, echoed Jessica and Michelle's thoughts: "I did get a little wound up when worship is like now is the time when we will sing which it can be obviously but … basically worship is about your whole life and everything." Jessica, Michelle and Jayne indicate that their worship was not confined to a specific time and place but applied to whatever task they were performing. Consequently, they embraced the belief that worship is not solely about corporate worship, reflecting a perspective in the theological literature which suggests that it is impossible to separate devotion to God from all aspects of existence. Worship encompasses the whole of life, both work and play and can take the form of any activity (Benson, 1994; Davies, 2013; Earey, 1995; Ellis, 2009; Forrester, McDonald & Tellini, 1996). In being a part of the respondents' lives, sport became enveloped by this perspective.

In making it clear that every aspect of their life, including sport, was an opportunity for worship these respondents present an outlook that contrasts with Harvey (2014) in his consideration of sport from a Christian perspective. In looking to propose a theology of sport he opposes the idea that sport is worship. He argues that, unlike other activities, the value of sport lies in itself and therefore cannot be used to serve another purpose such as worship as this would contradict the value of sport. Rather it is the perspectives of White (2018) and Treat (2015; 2018) that Jessica, Michelle and Jayne appear to reflect. In contrast to a dualistic view, where activities fall into the realms of either the sacred or the 'secular', these authors argue for a sacramental understanding of the world. Both creation and human structures in God's created world are viewed as playing a part in witnessing to God which leads to the belief that worship can be offered through other activities beyond those of traditional formal worship. This brings

a sacramental nature to these activities which can then be considered as acceptable forms of worship. This perspective also fits with Davies' (1994) 'wider' definition of worship and Benson's (2013) extensive liturgy in that worship is carried out separately, divorced from the church and its members. This encourages a more intimate approach to the act of devotion that embraces all aspects of a Christian's life and considers activities which would normally be considered secular pursuits to take on a spiritual dimension. Alongside respondents' perspectives on Sunday worship, highlighted previously, this represents a move away from worship in its traditional sense.

It is evident from Jessica, Michelle and Jayne's interview extracts that worship, for them, is not exclusive to sport but something they practice in all areas of their lives. Worship therefore takes the form of whatever activity they are undertaking at the time. In this instance it is sport which remains unaltered and determines the configuration of worship. This perspective of enacting and embodying worship in all areas of life is cited by Ellis and Weir (2020) to explain why elite evangelical athletes worship through sport, yet unlike Jessica, Michelle and Jayne who indicate that sport is not singled out as an activity for worship, the elite evangelical athletes of Ellis and Weir (2020) appear to make little reference to other areas of their lives. What respondents in the present study suggest, is that worship is about the whole of one's life and not merely confined to sport. This apparent difference in findings could be explained by the fact that these respondents, unlike those of Ellis and Weir's (2020), were not confined to a specific group i.e., elite evangelical athletes, but represented both a broader range of Christian denominations and ability levels.

Despite respondents' best intentions, sport as worship was far from straightforward and putting theory into practice often proved problematic. Earlier in the chapter, Alex, explained how his behaviour and attitude were key to his worship through hockey. Here he acknowledges the challenges to maintaining this within the context of a national league hockey game:

> The funny thing is, there's theory, and that's one thing, and there's practice and that's a whole different thing. … It's a challenge though cos' … going on the pitch which, for example, with the ref[eree], umpire in hockey, if I've just been given a decision against me and I think it's unfair or wrong … how exactly my worship is with that one is a bit difficult to work out. … Until you've actually tried worship on the pitch, what it means to worship when it comes to an umpire giving a wrong decision in your eyes, against you, it makes you look bad. What does worship look like then? I tell you what … that's a challenge! ... I have kind of thought about it, but it's still work in progress, by no means have I got it nailed.

Alex was not alone in experiencing confusion in determining how exactly to worship through sport. Non-denominational Christian George struggled to maintain the behaviour he believed was significant to sport as worship:

> It was an act of worship. From the point of view of stepping on the park, I … desperately wanted it to be but there is a lot of times I had to turn in after the game and say that it wasn't what God wanted me to do or say or act and I've got to ask forgiveness for that. I had a career where … God called me to be

> apart from these things, but it was difficult. … God called me to go and play football for his glory but it's so easy saying it and so difficult to know what that looks like. … I think that's the big thing. … We say that you put God first but really what does that look like? … We say that you want to play football for God but what does that mean?

As noted earlier, the key to sport as worship for Alex and George was competing in a manner that reflected their religious beliefs. Here they articulate uncertainty as to the behaviour required of them to achieve this. It seems without the necessary knowhow Alex and George felt they had little alternative but to conform to the normative values of sport, but which could be antithetical to those of their faith.

It was a lack of knowledge that Stevenson (1991) concluded was the primary reason that his respondent group of 'segregated' Western Canadian elite evangelical Christian athletes struggled to combine their role as a Christian with that of sport. In seeking a resolution to their uncertainty, Stevenson (1991) noted how this group of athletes kept sport and faith as two distinct areas of their lives. Alex and George chose a different response and, despite their difficulties, persevered. Furthermore, these data provide insight into a specific area of the Christianity-sport interface in which Christian athletes felt they lacked knowledge, that of worship, thereby it highlights an area of the relationship where athletes could be helped and supported in their endeavours to live out their faith whilst participating in sport.

It seems that neither George nor Alex experienced the dilemma that Hoffman (1992a) believes elite evangelical US athletes can encounter, who in their desire to participate

in sport (to the extent that it becomes a sacred act), are haunted by the thoughts that sport, and the competitive culture that surrounds it, lacks value and is insignificant. For Alex and George then, their struggles in worshipping through sport appeared not to simply be with the culture of sport and its worth as a form of worship, but with their lack of understanding as to how to offer sport as worship. Along with the existing evidence, what these data indicate, is that sport as worship is far from straightforward for Christian athletes. Given respondents here participated in a different context to the win-at-all-costs culture of US sport and which is dominated by evangelical Christianity (Krattenmaker, 2010), it could be argued that it is the contrasting cultural environments that provides possible insight into the different issues the athletes experienced with the notion of sport as worship.

What this section has indicated is that some respondents embraced the sentiment that it is impossible for Christians to separate devotion to God from all aspects of existence and that worship, rather than referring to a group activity confined to designated locations or occasions, encompasses the whole of a Christian's life (Davies, 1994; Earey, 1995; Ellis, 2009; Forrester, Macdonald & Tellini, 1996). In being a part of their lives, sport was an opportunity for worship, and moreover sport was reconfigured as worship. This brought a spiritual dimension to sport. Sport did not equate to respondents' devotions, rather there seemed to be an inextricable link between faith and every aspect of their lives. Nevertheless, in reconfiguring sport as worship, sport maintained many of its regular features and it was worship that was redesigned to fit in with sport. In line with the existing literature, central to sport as worship was respondents' behaviour whilst competing (Ellis & Weir, 2020; Smith, 2018). That said, worship through sport provided challenges. Respondents identified occasions that

both tested their resolve, or where they lacked the necessary knowledge to match their intentions of worship. Having explored respondents' perspective that sport, like every aspect of their life, provided an avenue for worship, the next section considers the significance of God given gifts in worship.

Using God-Given Gifts

The previous section ascertained that there were respondents who, on the basis that there was no distinction between the sacred and secular, viewed all areas of their lives as worship. This was not the only means by which they interpreted sport as worship, a similar perspective came from the belief that sporting abilities were bestowed by God. This gave rise to the second theme in sport as worship; 'Using God Given Gifts' in sport. Analysis of the interview data identified that all respondents, regardless of ability or Christian background, attributed their sporting talents to God. The belief that sporting ability is a gift is a recurring theme, throughout the existing literature (see for example, Altrogge, 2008; Coakley, 2016; Ellis, 2014; Null, 2016) and typified here by international cricketer Jill:

> I was born a sports woman really and that has been my life … I've always believed that the ability I have been given is from God but I didn't recognise that 'til I was 18, 19. … This is who I am and it's what God made me to do really.

As well as supporting this view, respondents went further and expressed the belief that this gift was to be used to worship. Denise articulated this: "You're using the gift that God has given you, to do what He wants you to be doing, so in a way you're doing His will, so it's worship." Denise's gift was rowing and so worship for her took this form

and she was able to meet her desire to worship without compromising her sport. Hence, she provided evidence to support the suggestion of Ellis and Weir (2020) that the implication of being a recipient of God given sporting gifts is that they are for the purpose of competing. They argued that it was the glorifying of God through divine gifts that was both the instigator and central to the concept of sport as worship in their study of elite evangelical athletes. In taking a different approach to faith, Denise indicates that the belief that God given gifts are a key element in sport as worship extends beyond the existing evidence.

Evidence of this perspective outside the evangelical tradition was also provided by non-denominational Christian Alex:

> I think that the purpose of any gift is, whether it be a sporting gift or intellectual gifts … is to honour God. … I think that the main job that people have is … first to have a relationship with God and second, is to use the gift they've been given to worship him.

Alex is not only of the belief that his sporting gifts are to be used in worship, but that he was given the ability to play hockey for this very reason. His God given ability to play hockey for the purpose of worship then determined the style of his worship. In this sense, Alex provides new insight into the notion of sport as worship.

By comparing himself to his fellow ice-hockey players and the apparent ease with which he plays, Anglican Gavin, who competed internationally, concluded that his skills were God given:

> I see people who try and play and can't and I realise I am only not like that because of the gifts I have been given. Sometimes I do things instinctively and I've no idea how I have done it. It's a gift … I couldn't do sport unless God had given me the gift and it is a part of worship. It allows me to be me to give back to God what he has put in me. If I do not do this, I am not worshipping God with what I have.

In this extract, Gavin articulates the view that his God given gifts manifest themselves as some kind of divine ability to do things that others cannot, and which comes naturally to him. Like Alex, Gavin's skills are framed alongside an obligation to worship, and this is the sole reason he has such natural ability. It seems that for Gavin worship is the 'returning' of his God given gifts, in his case the natural ability to play ice-hockey, is lived out and given back to their original source thus enabling worship. Sentiments akin to this were expressed by Anglican Ray, who had played football professionally and semi-professionally: "Worship isn't just kind of singing songs, but it is giving things back to God, … and offering them to him but this is the gift of playing sport, let me use it for your glory". For Ray, it was the utilization of God given gifts, whatever form that took, that was the essence of worship.

Gavin and Ray reflect a model of worship outlined by White (1997) as that of serving God. However, White (1997) goes on to explain how individuals can only offer to God in service those things which were originally given by God, which includes ones' talents and that it is only through God's grace that an individual can do this. It is from this perspective that White (2018), in his theoretical consideration, and Ellis and Weir

(2020), through empirical research with elite evangelical athletes, suggest that the enactment of sporting performance can legitimately be regarded as worship. Furthermore, Gavin and Ray as Anglicans, indicate that this perspective is more widespread than that indicated by existing research.

What the respondents featured here display is a belief more diverse to that traditionally associated with worship and one outlined by White (2000) in his further consideration of Christian worship. He notes that, although it is possible to make general statements about worship, cultural and historical diversity needs to be acknowledged. This leads White (2000) to advocate for inclusion in worship. One way to do this is by recognising the differing gifts bestowed on individuals and appreciating them as genuine forms of worship. However, he does stress the need for integrity when offering one's gifts and talents, particularly those that are alien and unfathomable to others. Ryan, a non-denominational Christian, who played national premier league hockey, brought to light a potential problem when it came to the context of sport:

> God gave me a talent and that's to play hockey or play sport in general and I'm going to use that to worship him just like some people are good at singing and they can sing their hearts out to God, or some people can … be incredibly kind and do that for God or work very hard and worship in that way or cook fantastic food. ... I worship God through my talents which are hockey and I think that's perfectly acceptable. There's probably more traditional Christians who maybe disagree with that to some extent.

Ryan's observations resonate with the arguments of White (2000) in that he recognised that there may be some Christians who neither understand nor accept the concept of worship through sport. However, this did not deter him from the belief that his God given sporting skills, like Denise, Alex, Gavin and Ray previously, were to be used in worship. Such a view necessitates that worship takes the form of an individual's sport. Worship is then reconfigured to meet the form and structure of sport which remains unchanged.

This section has highlighted the idea that all respondents, regardless of the standard at which they competed, considered their sporting ability to be a God given gift and therefore of spiritual significance. This led to the belief that these gifts were then to be used in the worship. In doing so, the respondents adopted a less conventional perspective to the concept of spiritual gifts. Furthermore, they then suggested a belief that it was appropriate to use these gifts in an environment which is not traditionally associated with Christian worship, an approach which is acknowledged in the existing theological literature (White, 1997; White, 2000) and also in wider considerations of sport as worship (Ellis & Weir, 2020; White, 2018). This necessitates that worship was reconfigured to not only fit in with sport, but the particular sport the athlete participated in. For some respondents merely using their God given gifts was insufficient and nurturing these gifts to their full potential also had a role in worship. The discussion now turns to look at this in more detail.

Giving One's Best

As the previous section explained, all respondents, regardless of ability, viewed their sporting skills to be a gift from God and of spiritual significance. In turn, many then

deemed it appropriate to use this gift as a form of worship i.e., through their sporting participation. However, there were some participants who emphasised that these gifts came with the responsibility to develop their sporting skills to their full potential, as explained here by Anglican Ray, who as highlighted earlier, envisioned worship as the returning of God given gifts to their source:

> I think … that there are gifts given by God. I also think we've got a responsibility to work hard, nurture them and train to be better. … God gives us something like hand-eye co-ordination, whatever it is, but … I'm never … going to be any standard if I don't train and work hard.

This perspective gave rise to a third theme in the interpretation of sport as worship; 'Giving One's Best'. At the heart of this was the need for the athletes to give their utmost to achieve their full sporting potential and it was by doing this that they offered worship.

Whilst discussing the impact of her faith, Evangelical Roman Catholic and international rugby union player Amy, typified the theme of 'Giving One's Best':

> I believe I've been created to play and so therefore by doing that to the best of my abilities … is a physical act of worship in that I'm doing something God created me to do in the best way I can … to my fullest potential, through all my effort and commitment. I think it's helped me to really focus on what motivates me to win i.e., who am I trying to please when I'm playing my best? Is it me

> and selfish gain or is it … trying to sort of give thanks back to God and say, "Well, you've made me this way so I'd better do it the best I can as a thanks."

Just as she did over her decision to play sport rather than attend corporate worship, Amy scrutinised her reasons for giving her best. She was aware that her desire for success could also be a motivating factor. In meeting the need to give her best to her sport for the purposes of worship Amy also meets the demands of the success orientated culture of sport. Non-denominational Christian Ryan, was also attentive to his reasons for giving his best, and was conscious that he craved the previous recognition he had as an international hockey player:

> He meant us to enjoy it and I want to honour him in everything I do with sport. However, in reality I think maybe sometimes people play sport, and … this is probably for me a little bit as well, for worldly recognition. … When you've been an international athlete and you are getting a lot of respect for that and play at a very high standard, certainly when you are no longer there, I feel this massively with international hockey.

Both Amy and Ryan experience a degree of internal conflict in analysing their motivations for giving their best when competing. Their intention is to give their best to their sport for the purposes of worshipping God, a motivation contrary to what might be assumed of other athletes in their striving for victory and sporting success. For these respondents' success seems to be linked to them facilitating worship through giving their best to their sport. Such beliefs enable them to meet the demands of sport as they serve to promote skill and attitudinal development that is conducive to more

traditional notions of sporting success. Historically, an element of suspicion has been directed at some Christian athletes who have been perceived as a threat to cultural norms and practices given the perception that they have concentrated on their faith rather than their sporting performance (Hoffman, 2010; Krattenmaker, 2010). This seems to be contradicted by Amy and Ryan's interpretation of sport as worship.

In a comparable way to the evangelical elite athletes in Ellis and Weir's (2020) study, Amy and Ryan believed that it was by dedicating themselves to the nurture of their God given sporting skills that they offered worship and glorified God. This seems a regular belief and practice for elite evangelical athletes with further evidence provided by Stevenson (1997), Aitken (1993) and Hoffman (1992a, 2010). Amy described herself as evangelical. Ryan, however, did not but still embraced the notion of giving one's best as being significant in worship thereby signifying this interpretation of worship is held by respondents of differing Christian denominations. Furthermore, in Ryan's case, he maintained this attitude despite no longer competing at the elite level. This indicates that giving ones best when competing as a way of worshipping God through sport extends beyond the elite level.

Anglican Catholic Kyle, who had played both professional and semi-professional football, also emphasised the importance of 'hard work' as a key constituent of worship:

> The gift is there, like the calling of a Christian is there, it's how you respond to it … it needs to be nurtured, it needs to be … developed. … I saw it as … glory to God. That means I've got to work hard because God wants me to work hard

> for the manager. If I'm not turning up on time or "I'll have tonight off," which a lot of people do whether or not they're feeling ill … that's cheating, isn't it? You're cheating yourself; you're cheating God, you're cheating your employer … so I feel guilty. The guilt … keeps me having to do the right things.

In targeting sport as worship through giving his best, Kyle utilised this belief to keep him motivated and committed to all aspects of football. The importance of sport as worship, for Alex, was highlighted previously. He, like Kyle, articulated the objective of worship as the drive behind the development of his skills: "I think that certain things I try to practice, certain skills I try to … improve and the motivation behind that was thinking it was about worship so, I thought I'd better get this skill". As for previous respondents, for both Alex and Kyle, the key to sport as worship was the need to develop and make progress in terms of their sporting skills. In doing so, they reflected a perspective which has been embraced by Anglo-American society throughout history and encourages individuals to seek progression and personal development in all areas of their lives (Schaffner, 2021). This perspective is also reflected in the literature on the sport-Christianity interface (Ellis, 2011; Treat, 2015, 2018). This points to the fact that humans were not created perfect but with the potential to develop. As a result, Treat (2015; 2018), in advocating that play is intrinsic to humans, suggests individuals are called to both enjoy the gift of sport but also develop their skills for the glory of God.

Furthermore, the interview extracts provided here suggest that in meeting what respondents perceived as their Christian responsibility to worship by giving their best to their sport, they were also able to meet what they believe was expected of them by

society and also those in the sporting world. This finding draws parallels with Hoffman (1992a & 2010) who highlighted the coincidence that the doctrine that worship through sport requires athletes give their utmost effort to their sporting performance also enables them to meet with the expectations of high-level sport. He argues how sport benefits as much as religious belief with this interpretation. The same intensity and commitment that determines the value of sport as worship also improves the athletes' chances of sporting success.

Moreover, Kyle and Alex's explanations went further, not only reflecting the existing literature, but indicating that this interpretation of worship served as a further incentive and motivation to develop their sporting skills, with which comes the potential to improve their chances of sporting success. As a result, Kyle and Alex provide new insight into the relationship between sport and worship and as such an area of the sport-Christianity dyad in need of further study. What these extracts indicate is that this interpretation of sport as worship allows respondents to negotiate both the requirements of faith and sport in a way that does not compromise athletic performance. Indeed, it could be argued that sport as worship is utilized to improve sporting skills and so enhance performance. This raises questions as to whether it is sport that is serving the requirements of faith or if faith is used to help meet the demands and goals of sport.

This section has expanded on the notion of God given gifts to highlight the significance of giving one's best in sport as worship. There were respondents who acknowledged the responsibility that came with sporting gifts to develop them to their full potential and to give their all to their sporting performance. This supports existing literature,

much of which focuses on elite evangelical athletes (Aitken, 1993; Ellis & Weir, 2020; Hoffman, 1992a, 2010; Stevenson, 1997). However, the evidence here also suggests this to be the case for those athletes of other Christian traditions and of varying sporting abilities. It has highlighted how the motivation behind giving one's best with the intention to worship aligned favourably with the goals and culture of competitive sport, a finding which concurs with the observations of Hoffman (1992a, 2010), but could also go beyond this to be utilized as a motivation to improve sporting skills and performance.

Conclusion

Analysis of the data identified one of the ways that respondents combined their sport and their faith was by participating in their sport as an act of worship. This confirmed and extended the notion of sport as worship indicated in the existing literature. In adding to previous findings, the chapter has explored this notion from the perspective of athletes of different Christian denominations and ability levels, athletes that are under-represented in existing research. Although not identical, sport as worship was identified to be more akin to personal devotion than traditional worship. The athletes' decision to worship privately caused their chosen sporting pursuit to dictate to the shape and form of worship and worship, as Hoffman (1992a) indicated, was indistinguishable from sport. With the demands of sport determining the structure and features of worship respondents, in line with proposals in the existing literature (Ellis & Weir, 2020; Smith, 2017; White, 2018), aimed to reconfigure sport as worship by competing in a morally and ethically sound way. Furthermore, sport as worship was utilized to improve sporting skills and performance, and potentially increase an athlete's chances of sporting success, indicating that rather than sport serving

worship, worship served sport. The analysis of the data presented here establishes evidence that it is the nature of worship that is altered significantly rather than the way sport is performed, and which allows athletes to meet what they perceive to be the demands and expectations of their faith. Rather than sport being reconfigured as worship, it is worship that is reconfigured as sport.

Whilst confirming the notion of sport as worship in the extant literature, the research undertaken as contributed new insight on this area of the sport-Christianity interface. In highlighting some of the issues Christian athletes encountered in reconfiguring sport as worship, it noted that some respondents, despite their best intentions, felt they lacked the knowledge to achieve this goal. In addition, the research has also identified a new perspective on God-given sporting gifts with the data indicating the belief that gifts are bestowed by God for the purposes of worship. Furthermore, there were indications that giving one's best as a form of worship was used as a motivation to improve sporting skills and so enhance performance.

The research has also identified further areas that contrast with that indicated in the existing literature. It has argued that rather than a congruence between sport and corporate worship (Ellis & Weir; 2020), athletes experienced a tension between the timings of the two activities. It was this tension that athletes sought to address by worshipping through sport. With this apparent difference the research undertaken here has called for more in-depth study of the relationship between sport and corporate worship. Furthermore, the findings of Ellis and Weir (2020), which, although acknowledging worship is possible in all areas of life, appeared to indicate that sport was the sole means by which elite evangelical athletes offered worship. In contrast,

respondents here did not confine worship to sport, but worship enveloped every aspect of their lives. A potential cause of this difference was identified to be the broader range of athletes, both in terms of Christian denominations and sporting abilities, researched here which contrasted with the specific group of athletes, namely elite evangelical, of the existing research. Once again, this difference points to a need for greater research to establish if such a difference does exist and if so, bring clarity and deeper understanding of this matter. Having examined the notion of sport as worship the discussion now moves to explore the relationship between sport and a ritual often associated with corporate worship, that of prayer.

Chapter 7: Sport and Prayer

Introduction

The previous chapter has addressed a dominant theme in the existing literature, that of sport and worship. It identified how respondents evidenced an alternative and less traditional approach to worship and one that aligned with their sporting lives. Attention now turns to focus on a practice often associated with worship, that of prayer. An analysis of the interview data highlighted that prayer was central to respondents combining the demands and expectations of competitive sport with their Christian faith. Hence, it is the relationship between sport and prayer that this chapter examines. The discussion identifies how respondents adopted a prayer routine in relation to their participation in sport. This routine, which saw prayers offered before, during and after a sporting event, is examined in detail. Attention then turns to the content of the prayers offered by respondents and identifies three principal areas namely, sporting performance, safety and protection, and thanksgiving. In-depth consideration is given to each of these themes in turn. Finally, and by way of drawing the chapter to a close, the impact of both a prayer routine and its content on the athletes' participation in sport is investigated. Before considering these matters the chapter begins by exploring how and why respondents established a relationship between sport and prayer.

Sport and Prayer

Any discussion of sport and prayer necessitates consideration of what is understood by the term 'prayer.' According to related literature, prayer is the religious practice whereby humans communicate and develop a personal relationship with God (see, for example, Heiler, 1932; McGrath, 1997; White, 1997, Watson & Czech, 2005). A

distinction is drawn between public and private prayer. Public prayer is that of the church and deemed an integral part of worship. In contrast, private prayer is a personal matter, instigated by the individual. The preceding chapter highlighted the difficulties respondents had in attending corporate worship given the scheduling of sporting events. Likewise, prayer of a public nature proved difficult for athletes. Consequently, it is the latter definition of prayer that is considered most relevant to the forthcoming discussion. To this end, prayer is considered to be an individual and private matter through which individuals communicate and develop a relationship with God.

Initial analysis of the interview data identified prayer as a practice used by all respondents as a way of connecting their faith with sport. This was typified by evangelical Christian and footballer Michelle: “I think praying is … bringing your faith and your sport together, praying is the way you do that” and Gavin, an Anglican and international ice-hockey player: “Prayer helps me combine my sport and my faith. When I walk into the dressing room, I’m looking for my prayers to have been answered.” In these statements Michelle and Gavin explicitly identified prayer as the significant factor in enabling them to combine their Christian faith with sport. As such, rather than there being an established link between sport and faith, athletes make a conscious attempt to combine these two areas of their lives through prayer. This suggests that the relationship between sport and prayer, rather than being a natural one, is achieved through a deliberate act instigated by respondents.

What Michelle and Gavin demonstrate here is evidence of the intertwining of sport and faith through prayer outlined by Hoffman (2011) and Price (2009) in their critical analysis of the relationship between sport and prayer. Furthermore, they show that a

similar amalgamation of sport and faith through prayer exists for Christian athletes competing outside of the US. However, there appears to be a contrast between how the relationship comes to exist for respondents in these respective groups of athletes. Both Hoffman (2011) and Price (2009) draw on a lifetime of academic study of the sport-religion interface to advocate that prayer has become absorbed and intertwined into the sporting context. According to them, it is a part of the very structure of contemporary sport for US Christian athletes. Rather than the respondents in the present study experiencing an environment where prayer was part of the very fabric of their sporting lives, prayer was something of a mechanistic process by which they forged a link between sport and faith. Participants represent a broad range of Christian denominations whilst the relationship between sport and religion in the US is dominated by evangelical Christianity (Krattenmaker, 2010). Having identified how by deliberately choosing to pray about their involvement in sport respondents were able to establish a link between faith and sport, the following discussion looks to explore how this played out in practice, beginning with the consideration of their prayer routine.

Prayer Routine

Further analysis of the data on this theme indicated that the instigating factor in respondents combining faith with sport through prayer was a sporting event or occasion. Anglican and international rugby union player Joshua outlined how he surrounded a match with prayer: “I prayed before matches, but there would be arrow[5] prayers during and afterwards I would always give thanks.” George, who over time, had attended churches of various Christian denominations and played football at both

[5] Asking for God’s immediate help in a particular situation. https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/learning-pray

professional and non-league level, explained his prayer routine with respect to games: “I’ve prayed before I’ve gone on the pitch … and after the game I’d thank Him [God].” Joshua and George’s responses were typical of all participants, each of whom explained that they adopted a prayer routine that involved praying before, during and/or after a sporting event. Research into the relationship between sport and prayer in the sport-Christianity interface literature appears limited. However, Czech et al. (2004) carried out research from a sport psychology perspective into the experiences of prayer by Christian athletes. This involved their interviewing of nine former NCAA Division I Christian Athletes associated with para-church organisations or various Christian church groups. Their findings highlighted how these North American collegiate athletes adopted a prayer routine in relation to a sporting event. This routine was seldom deviated from, with athletes having specific rituals prior to, during, and after practice and competition.

Evangelical Christian Michelle, who as indicated previously, viewed prayer as important in her combining of faith and sport, explained how she prayed in relation to football matches: “I probably pray most before and … during the game sometimes I’ll be praying a quick prayer. … So … before and during, it’s probably afterwards I forget.” Anglican Ray also revealed the greater significance he attached to prayer at differing times in relation to football matches: “I definitely pray in terms of a match … mostly before, sometimes during, very rarely after.” Evangelical Roman Catholic Amy indicated the differing significance of prayer for her in relation to a rugby union match: “Prayer helps … I pray before, sometimes during and occasionally after.” What these interview extracts highlight is that Michelle, Ray and Amy were most likely to maintain the routine of prayer prior to participation in sport. The significance of the practice

diminished with the onset of the sporting event and became less relevant and could even be forgotten about or neglected. This trend was evident throughout the data, with all respondents undertaking prayer prior to sport, 18 during an event and 15 afterwards. Michelle, Ray and Amy, demonstrate that prayer preceding a sporting event was of most importance to participants whilst prayers following an event were of least significance. These findings concur with empirical research in the discipline of sports psychology by Czech and Bullet (2007) who investigated 19 NCAA Division II collegiate athletes' perceptions of Christian prayer in sport. Data, gathered through surveys, personal interviews and observations during athlete prayer meetings noted that although the athletes supported the notion of prayer both before and after their sport, it was before that a greater number of athletes engaged in the activity.

Michelle who, as outlined previously, prioritised prayer prior to, above during and after participation in a university football match, explained how she made a habit of engaging in pre-match prayer: "It's just natural before a game. I always have a decent time in the morning and pray about it." Chloe, who also played football at university, attended a CE church. She too explained how, without exception, she intentionally allocated a time of prayer before a game: "I always have a time slot in the week prior to match on Sunday." Evangelical Roman Catholic, Amy, also indicated a regular practice of praying in preparation for representing her country at rugby union:

> When I prepare … particularly for international matches … I always prepare my personal devotions before the match routine. There's always … [I] read a certain verse of the Bible … or Hebrews and pray … so I keep that as part of my build up and that's a consistent thing I do every time.

It seems that in much the same way as adopting routine in life has positive benefits for sleep, health and well-being (Arlinghaus & Johnston, 2019; Ali, Rouf, Mohsin, Meltzer, Sharma, & DiClemente, 2022; Mindell & Williamson, 2018), Michelle, Chloe and Amy indicate that developing a routine in relation to prayer has a positive influence on their participation in sport. This approach to prayer further aligns with the study of Czech et al. (2004) whose investigations led them to suggest that a key theme in their research was the adoption of a prayer routine in relation to a sporting event from which athletes rarely deviated.

According to Womack (1992), a set pattern of behaviour which follows an ordered sequence, which Amy outlines here, is one of the key features of ritual. Following several years of observations and interviews with professional athletes in US sport, Womack (1992) uses her experiences to discuss the role of ritual in sport and debates why athletes continue to engage in such practices, despite such behaviours being considered superstitious. Amy's approach to prayer also aligns with other traits identified by Womack (1992) in her operational definition of ritual. These include the fact that Amy's behaviours were repeated prior to each game and the practice was something Amy conducted separately from her everyday life. Furthermore, Womack (1992) explains how rituals tend to be adopted by athletes in uncertain situations and can be used to focus attention and reduce anxiety. It seems that the significance for Amy, in terms of her performance, lay not in the content of the prayers she offered but in the ritualistic behaviour she adopted towards the practice which enabled her to concentrate on the task ahead and help her cope with the stress and anxiety which accompany participation in international sport. Amy's practice was like the ritualistic

approach to prayer identified by Czech et al. (2004) with NCAA Division I Christian Athletes. They noted how having adopted a prayer routine these athletes seldom deviated from the practice, and they had specific rituals they engaged in prior to, during, and after competition. Furthermore, although explaining that this was a routine she consistently practiced, Amy indicates that it took on greater importance when competing for her country. This might suggest that as the significance of the sporting occasion and its outcome increased, so does her need to engage her prayer routine. Indeed, Czech and Bullet (2007) suggest that the importance and intensity of prayer increased with the importance an athlete attached to an event.

The use of a prayer routine by respondents both confirms and adds support to the existing empirical evidence (Czech et al., 2004; Czech & Bullet, 2007). Furthermore, it identifies that the significance of a prayer routine for Christian athletes from a range of Christian traditions, ability levels, sports and ages. However, there appeared to be a marked difference between the athletes involved in the present study and the US athletes of Czech and Bullet (2007) when it came to the practice of praying after a sporting event. Czech and Bullet (2007) noted that although 18 of their 19 respondents prayed prior to event, and despite supporting the notion of prayer after a game, 'most' did not engage in the activity. In contrast, 15 of the 25 respondents within the present study prayed following sport indicating that they attached greater significance to prayer at this time than those of Czech and Bullet's (2007) pilot study. Respondents in the two studies were drawn from different cultural backgrounds, the US athletes competing in an environment where prayer has become part of the very structure of contemporary sport (Hoffman, 2011; Price, 2009) whilst respondents in the present study suggested that the relationship between sport and prayer was a

deliberate, conscious act made by individual athletes and who instigated their own times of private prayer. Having identified how respondents adopted a prayer routine in relation to their sport the discussion now moves to consider the content of these prayers.

Prayer Content

In Amy's explanation of her prayer routine, she provided insight into the content of the prayers she offered. Although respondents' prayers covered a wide range of topics, three main themes emerged from the data. These were prayers regarding sporting performance, prayers for safety and protection and thanksgiving prayers, each of which will now be examined in detail.

Prayers Regarding Sporting Performance

For almost all respondents, central to their prayers regarding sport were those which focused on sporting performance. Anglican Jayne had represented her country at running. She articulated the focus of her prayers prior to a race:

> I'd pray that I would do my best that I could … I would get really nervous about it because I so much wanted to do my best. I would definitely pray that I would do my best and be able to perform in that place with the training that I'd done.

It was whilst describing how prayer helped her participation in a rowing regatta that Denise revealed that she too included a request to perform to the extent of her capabilities:

> I believe everything comes from God … so … I would always pray that … God would help me to do my best. I'd say… that I … row my best and then afterwards just say thank you for helping me.

For Methodist Melanie, an international field archer, it was not just prior to a tournament that she would pray to compete to a high standard: "I'd pray for a good tournament, to perform at my best. I'd also pray during the shoot for a good performance." The words of Jayne, Denise and Melanie indicate that the intention behind their prayers was the enhancement of their sporting performance. Indeed, this was the objective behind most respondents' prayers. What these extracts suggest is a link between prayer and sporting performance and that by engaging in prayer, respondents believed they could improve their performance levels and their chances of success.

As highlighted previously, Roman Catholic Amy was particular about both the timing of her prayers and the format of her devotions. She too included a request to play to her potential: "[I pray] that I can play … to the best of my ability and so play in a way that kind of glorifies God rather than me." She was not alone in praying to this effect, similar sentiments were expressed by over half of the respondents and were typified by former professional George, who preferred not to confine himself to a particular Christian denomination and, who as indicated previously, prayed before participating in a football match: "I just prayed that I played for God…that's the prayer beforehand, I play for Him … and to glorify Him in what I'm doing". Sinead, a non-denominational Christian, articulated similar thoughts when discussing the focus of her prayers with respect to an upcoming international ice-hockey match: "I pray for my own good

performance … mainly it's just that … I'm able to glorify him through my performances."

What Amy, Sinead and George suggest is that their intention when participating in sport was to bring glory to God, something that they achieved through playing well and which stimulated them to pray to this effect. In other words, they indicate that praying to play well is not for their own selfish ends but to draw attention to God, something they felt they were more likely to do by playing well. These sentiments concur with the US athletes featured in the studies of Czech et al. (2004) and Czech and Bullet (2007). Both of these studies also identified athletes who prayed that they would glorify God through their participation in sport.

The discussion has so far shown that respondents' prayers which focussed on playing to the best of their ability, whether for their own sporting gain or to glorify God, were directed at enhancing their sporting performance. Although many respondents were quick to point out that they would not pray for victory, or for a specific outcome or result. However, by praying to perform to their full potential they were also praying to improve their performance which increased their chances of success. Rachel, who played rugby union and netball to university and club standard respectively, demonstrated this: "My prayers focus on playing well and for a good game … and to be aware of God. I don't pray to win. I pray to play as best I can for God." Non-denominational Christian and national hockey league player Ryan was of a comparable mindset:

> I don't really pray to win to be honest. What I do pray for is the right outcome, whereas on the pitch I give 100% effort and everything to win but still in the mind that I'm playing to honour God.

International triathlete Jack, who struggled to define his approach to his faith, articulated a similar approach to prayer:

> I pray to give glory to God, to perform as a Christian and that race goes well. I never pray to win or let so and so be beaten or that they get a puncture but just to bring glory to God.

Similar to other respondents, Rachel, Ryan and Jack explained that their prayers to play well were not for their own benefit but were a way of acclaiming God. This was distinct from them praying to win whereby the respondents prayed for a good performance, but not necessarily to win or to achieve a specific outcome. This finding supports Czech et al. (2004) and Czech and Bullet (2007) who identified that the US respondents' prayers were not for victory but to play their best. Furthermore, the present study provides evidence that this practice is more widespread than the existing research suggests.

Evangelical Christian Jeff, who played rugby union in the national league questioned the significance of winning: "Praying to win can be an issue. I don't think God always wants us to win." Anglican and professional cricketer Neil explained how he felt tempted to pray to win but he too doubted its importance:

> I try not to pray for success. The temptation is, “Oh, please give me a hundred,” but I’ve learned that … there’s … more to life. … It’s a difficult thing to kind of understand and accept but … me saying, “Please give me a hundred tomorrow.” … It’s me putting pressure on myself and putting pressure on God to give me what I want when in fact what he really wants for me is for my character to grow.

Gavin, an Anglican and professional ice-hockey player, who as revealed earlier viewed prayer as the avenue to combine sport and faith, highlighted the potential dilemma facing God with such requests: “Winning … it is not important or significant. How can God choose between who wins and who loses? There are no losers when it comes to God.” Neil, Jeff and Gavin consider the outcome of a sporting event in relation to their faith and conclude that it lacks importance. This causes them to question the relevance of praying for their own sporting success. Through this they provide empirical evidence supporting Hoffman’s (2011) concerns regarding praying to win. He suggests that this overlooks the possibility that God may take a far greater interest in the experiences individuals gain through sport rather than the outcome of the event itself.

Anglican Ray, who as we saw earlier attached greater significance to prayer at differing times in relation to a football match, questioned not only the significance of winning but had come to doubt the influence of prayer directed at his own success. These factors had contributed to him changing his perspective on the issue of praying to win:

> I think … it depends what you pray for, doesn’t it? Do you pray to win? I don’t think God cares! … So, if Brazil win the World Cup, of course, it’s God’s will. With

> hindsight if I win the match then whether I prayed about it or not, it's God's will. So, praying about say scoring … I don't think I would now.

As revealed previously, Anglican and international runner Jayne's prayers included a request to run to her full potential. She also explained how she had adjusted her view on praying for her own success:

> … not so much … praying that I would win … but I'd pray that I would do my best that I could. … God … could definitely have several people in a race praying they were going to win. At the end of the day … the person who wins is the person who does the best training and has got the best belief in what they do but I'm not into this like … "Well, I'm going to pray and God's going to make a miracle and I'm going to win my race." … Whereas I feel it's so much more about your whole dedication to your training and everything and when it comes out on the day, you can maybe thank God for helping you to train so hard and run…but it's more of your whole life up to that point that helps you win. It not like miracle prayer … I feel that some of the stuff I've seen or read … is a bit [of a] shallow … belief in God and I thought a little bit like [that] when I was [younger] … and having gone on further I don't think like that now.

Evangelical Roman Catholic Kyle, a former professional but now semi-professional footballer, was another respondent who had reassessed his perspective on the issue of praying to win:

> I used to pray to win and … it worked. Well, no, I thought it worked. … I thought, "Hang on a minute, the Bible says, 'Whatever you pray for … you will get'". So, I thought if I pray all week to win on Saturday, we'll win, fool proof formula! So, I prayed all week and we lost. So, what's going on? That was a massive learning curve for me that week. … I think it's foolish to pray to win … you've got to think why you're asking? … So, I've got to say, "Well, is it right to win? Am I praying for the right thing?" So, … I pray to work hard, … to push myself harder. … So, even though I don't pray to win, I pray for things that would help us win, that will help us maximise our potential, but I can't ask to win.

It seems that previously Ray, Jayne and Kyle believed that sporting success could be achieved by requesting it through prayer. This established a link between sport and faith with prayer being a utilitarian practice directed towards achieving this goal and is consistent with existing sociological literature (see, Aicinena, 2017) which suggests that Christian athletes can use prayer for the purposes of achieving sporting success and an enhancement of performance. This suggests that such prayers are not sincere Christian prayers but prayers that are directed to the secular god of success and therefore God, rather than being glorified, is belittled by the practice.

Having previously linked their sporting performance to the influence of God, with experience respondents began to question the efficacy of such prayers. Indeed, having used this strategy in the past, some sought other approaches to achieving sporting success. For Jayne this was to pay attention to other aspects of her training whilst Kyle reconfigured the content of his prayers to focus on specific elements of football which could contribute to a successful outcome. What respondents indicate

is a belief that success in sport, rather than being determined by God and requested through the utilitarian practice of prayer, was their own responsibility and that there was a need to work hard in the areas which would help bring them success such as training, diet, self-discipline. The data here support the work of Price (2009) into the use of prayer in sport. He argues that some US Christian athletes recognise that there is a need to work hard in sport and success is not the result of prayer.

Thus far, the discussion has revealed that whilst respondents sought to utilize prayer to enhance their sporting performance, they were reluctant to pray to win or for personal success, many deeming such a request to be morally inappropriate. Praying for victory proved to be a complex issue which athletes appeared to negotiate by praying to play to the best of their ability and which was further justified on the basis that this was with the intention of glorifying God through their performance. This was deemed an acceptable request. Likewise, Hoffman (2011) argues that prayers regarding the outcome of sport are best avoided. For him, praying to win is inherently self-centred and indirectly requests the opponent's failure. In reformulating their prayers to focus on aspects of their performance which enhance their success, rather than on winning, respondents circumnavigated the complexities that came with praying to win.

In contrast, a minority of respondents saw no issue with praying for their own success. Indeed Sinead, who as we saw earlier also prayed to play well in an international hockey match and thereby glorify God, took issue with those athletes who considered it inappropriate:

> I can think of something someone said before … "I don't think it's maybe right to pray to win." I don't agree with that … I don't think … wanting to win is a bad thing. … Often winning something means you go on to proceed further in the league or tournament.

For Methodist Melanie, who as revealed earlier prayed both before and during an international field archery tournament to play her best, the fact that God would not always comply with her petitions made such prayers acceptable: "I'm sure I prayed to win at some time. I don't really see a problem with this as it won't happen all time and others have their turn." As highlighted previously, Evangelical Christian Michelle used prayer before and during a football match as a way of combining faith and sport. She also expressed little concern over praying for success:

> I think people say, "Do you pray to win?" … I think you can pray about the result. I mean if you were praying that you would win … it's like anything … if you pray something happens you are not telling God what to do … 'cos he knows who's going to win. So, you're not really saying, "Oh, please change it" … I don't think there's anything you can't pray about because God knows everything you think about anyway.

Melanie and Michelle's interview extracts highlight that although they are happy to pray about the outcome of their sport, like Ray, Jayne and Kyle previously, express doubt as to the impact of such prayers. Indeed, it seems it is the potential lack of efficacy which brings a degree of justification to such prayers being offered. Melanie and Michelle's attitude to prayer concurs with and support the thoughts of Prebish (1993a)

who, in his consideration of the relationship between sport and Christianity, noted the anxieties athletes often experience with the unpredictable and uncertain nature of competitive sport. Prebish (1993a) goes on to suggest that athletes can allay such tensions through prayer and, although not certain as to whether prayer is helpful, athletes choose to engage in the practice so they do not miss out on any of the potential benefits of doing so.

With Sinead, Melanie and Michelle offering different perspectives to those cited previously, respondents reflect a degree of uncertainty around the notion of praying to win. Issues including the ethics of the practice and the significance of winning, etc. make for a confusing situation for athletes and it appears that athletes make their own individual decisions based on their experiences and thought processes as to the appropriateness of praying to win. These contrasting perspectives provide primary evidence to support the observations of Coakley (2016) who highlights the conflicting opinions around the use of prayer in US sport to achieve success. He explains that for some, using prayer in this way reduces it to a strategy to enhance performance and trivialises religious belief, whilst others believe that God does intervene in events, including those of a sporting nature. As well as praying about their sporting performance prior to their participation in sport, respondents also made requests regarding their safety and it to a consideration of these prayers that the discussion now addresses.

Prayers for Safety and Protection

There were a small group of respondents whose prayers focussed on another aspect of their participation, namely that they would remain free from injury. It was highlighted

earlier how Roman Catholic Amy adopted a routine to her requests that she played to the best of her ability and thereby glorified God. Here she reveals another dimension to her prayers:

> I pray for safety … praying for the safety of my team-mates and the opposition as well. … [The] general safety of all the players on the pitch and officials … praying that it is actually a good hard game, it's clean rather than a dirty match.

International ice hockey player and non-denominational Christian Sinead, as indicated previously, had little issue with praying for victory and included within her prayers a request to glorify God through her sport. She also revealed a request for protection within her prayers: "I pray for my own performance and safety … and the safety of others." Staying free from injury in an international ice-hockey match was also a feature of Gavin's prayers: "I pray for my safety in a contact sport … I have seen some horrific injuries. I thank God that I'm actually able to do my sport." What respondents here appear to suggest is that they benefitted from prayers that focussed on their physical well-being. A similar focus to prayers was suggested by Hoffman (2011) and Price (2009). Furthermore, the empirical research of both Czech et al. (2004) and Czech and Bullet (2007) identified how US athletes participating in the collegiate system prayed for the safety and protection of themselves and their fellow competitors, be it team-mates or the opposition.

Although prayers which focused on safety were limited to a small number of respondents, these athletes participated in the sports of rugby union and ice-hockey which, they acknowledged, given their physical nature came with an increased risk of

personal injury. With little evidence of such prayers being offered by athletes competing in less physical sports, such as running, it appeared that prayers for protection were favoured by respondents competing in the more aggressive sports. Again, this finding concurs with Hoffman's (1992c, 2011) observations that the incidence of prayers in US sporting contexts which deal with the issue of avoiding pain and injury tend to increase with the physicality of the sport. He argues that participants in sports such as tennis do not pray for safety to the same extent as those in American Football, whilst it is boxing that is most likely to cause participants to pray regarding this matter. In turn, Hoffman (2011) suggests that respondents use prayer as a psychological tool when competing in sports with a high degree of physical contact, and that such prayers are mentally beneficial, helping athletes supress anxieties and giving them increased confidence and courage to face the potential dangers which come with such sports. As well as petitions for safety, respondent prayers also included an expression of thanksgiving, and it is this aspect of prayer the discussion now considers.

Thanksgiving Prayers

Thus far the discussion has highlighted how athletes such as Joshua, Gavin, George and Denise all included within their prayers an expression of thanks for their involvement in sport. They were not alone in this. Although the post-event period was the time when participants were least likely to pray, it was still the practice of most respondents, and it was prayers of thanksgiving that were most common. Non-denominational Christian, George went into more detail as to the content of his thanksgiving prayers:

> [Before the game] I just prayed that I played for God … and after the game I'd thank him …for the result or thank him for the way I played and … afterwards it's just to say thanks for allowing me to go and do that.

International cricketer Jill explained that she thanked God for:

> …just the way that I played and … thank him for success and thank him for defeat … because sometimes I learn more from that than I did from winning and yes, I just thanked him in all things really.

As highlighted previously, cricketer and Anglican Neil had come to question the significance of winning. He also outlined the focus of his thanksgiving prayers: "I kind of try to pray … to accept whatever happens, if I get a hundred, 'Thank you' and if I don't still 'Thank you'… though probably not enough, sometimes I take it for granted." George, Jill and Neil's words appear to demonstrate how their thanksgiving prayers were an occasion for them to reflect on their performance. They took the opportunity to acknowledge and meditate on the outcome and their gratitude was expressed regardless of a positive or negative result. What these respondents provide is empirical evidence of an approach to prayer in sport which is advocated by Hochstetler (2009). Having highlighted the tensions that exist in the relationship between sport and prayer from a psychological perspective, Hochstetler (2009) offers recommendations for the use of prayer in sport based on spiritual maturity. He advocates prayers should be offered with humility and seek an alignment with God's purpose. Hochstetler (2009) suggests that the search for fellowship with God

necessitates occasions of prayer which include times of reflection, meditation, silence and listening.

Furthermore, as Jill indicates, it seems that respondents used this period of reflection to assess and learn from their performance. The extent that expressions of gratitude have been reported to be a powerful tool in encouraging positive mind states and overcoming negative attitudes (Carr, 2016; Froh, Sefick & Emmons, 2008; Sansone & Sansone, 2010; Wood, Joseph & Maltby, 2008) and these thanksgiving prayers by respondents potentially played a role in enhancing sporting performance. Likewise, by providing opportunities for athletes to develop a positive psychological state and learn from their sporting experiences, these post event prayers had the potential to benefit athletes in forthcoming events. The sentiments of respondents here, contrast with those of Czech et al. (2004) who concluded that the thankfulness prayers of their US respondents relating to the outcome of a sporting event were confined to the occasions of their success. The different cultural context of respondents here and those of Czech et al. (2004) potentially provides insight into the reason for this difference.

It was not just the outcome of their sport that caused respondents in the present study to offer prayers of thanksgiving. Free Methodist David, who had played professional football for an English Premier League team, outlined the content of his thanksgiving prayers:

> …You thank God for the time that He's given you to sport. You thank God for the training system. You thank God for the game. You thank God for the management, the training ground. You thank him for a whole host of things.

Like David, Anglican Catholic Kyle, had also played professional football but now played semi-professionally. As revealed previously, Kyle had changed his perspective on praying to win. He articulated the aspects of his sport for which he thanked God:

> Just everything basically. … Being able to play for one, being healthy for one, that's always nice. … To be able to play at a competitive level and earn … it's my full-time job. … I only get paid forty weeks of the year though, but it's my full-time job. … It's a wonderful career football is. … I'm just so pleased with everything. … The way it's [my career] worked out. If it works out different, then so be it but … God has been very kind to me … my cup overflows. To be a sportsman is wonderful. I've worked hard along the way but … he's given me the talent. He's given me the dedication to drive on. I've had stress fractures. I've had a lot of injuries … but God's helped me through them. I've got asthma. … I thank God for everything.

For David and Kyle, their expressions of gratitude were not confined solely to the outcome of a sporting event, it being extended to the finer details and benefits of their participation in sport. Similarly, lifelong Anglican Jessica discussed that her expressions of thanks included not just aspects related to her participation in sport but also to the multifaceted opportunities and broader life experiences that came from her sporting participation:

> I thank him for the actual ability to play sport. I work with a lot of disabled children, so it really brings home to you that you are physically able to play. … The opportunities to have good friends, to meet good friends, meet people from loads of different backgrounds, the actual games itself. … I thank Him for lots of things.

For international rugby union player and evangelical Roman Catholic Amy, it was her God given gift to play sport at the elite level which further enhanced her life experiences. She explained how her prayers thanked God for:

> … [the] friendships that I've made, the experiences and the opportunities that I've had, my chance to play and … to use all the gifts I've got as a rugby player … [in] … the best of arenas as it were and to play at the highest level and to be given the chance just to experience them.

Runner Jayne, who as noted earlier prayed to play to the best of her abilities but no longer prayed for her own success, also competed to international standard. She too recognised the enhanced opportunities that came her way because of this:

> I did thank God that he had given me the … ability to participate and … enabled me to have opportunities that I would may not have been able to have otherwise … I think everybody has got talents and gifts that God's given them. Mine's sport so … in a way it's obvious and when you're competing for your country it is a very obvious one and you get a certain amount of [recognition] … people do take

> an interest because of it whereas people who have got a gift for something else, it may not be as obvious so much but you can thank God … if you're gifted.

As was the case for Jessica, both Amy and Jayne were thankful for the experiences, both sporting and otherwise, that they had gleaned from their participation in sport. However, they also acknowledged that their lives had been further enriched by the standard to which they had competed, a level they believed they had attained because of their God given gifts. This leads them to express their gratitude in prayer, not just for their experiences, but also for their sporting gifts. Indeed, the thanksgiving prayers of these respondents extend far beyond their sporting endeavours. They were grateful for the life chances that had come their way as a result of their involvement in sport and the way their lives had been enriched by their participation. By including their broader life experiences in their thanksgiving prayers, Jessica, Amy and Jane demonstrate the types of prayer that Hochstelter (2009) indicates in his call for prayers in sport to be more spiritually mature. He suggests prayers should include the varied the experiences which come with sport such as opportunities for friendships and the pursuit of success. Additionally, the data from the present study confirms and supports that of Czech et al. (2004) with US athletes. They identified how respondents' prayers went beyond the outcome of sport and extended to expressing thanks not only for their sporting opportunities but for their life in general. The US athletes expressed their gratitude through prayer for their sporting abilities and talents.

The preceding section has reflected upon the content of respondents' prayers in relation to their sport. Prior to sport the main focus of respondents' prayers was sporting performance and an enhancement of athletic skills. This brought to light the

complex issue of praying to win and a plethora of responses. Most respondents stopped short of praying to win, many deemed it to be ethically inappropriate whilst others questioned the significance of winning. Respondents who, having previously prayed for their own success and now refrained from doing so, had changed their perspective, a decision which appeared to come from their experience of such prayers lacking efficacy. Indeed, it was a lack of efficacy that appeared to be the reasoning behind the few respondents who were happy to pray for their own success. In seeking to negotiate this contentious area respondents prayed to play to the best of their ability with the intention of glorifying God. A small number of respondents, who competed in sports with an elevated risk of injury, included within their prayers a request for safety and it was argued that this practice helped to give athletes the courage and confidence to compete in physically aggressive sports. Those offered in the post-sport period were dominated by prayers of thanks, often regardless of the outcome, expressing gratitude for being able to compete but also for the numerous and varied experiences and opportunities that came from this participation. The data has encouraged a deeper consideration of the relationship between sport and prayer. It indicates that athletes having deliberately sought to establish a link between sport and the Christian faith through prayer, then use this practice to enhance both their sporting experience but also their performance. Having highlighted and explored both the prayer routine and the content of respondents' prayers the chapter now looks to examine the impact of the practice.

The Impact of Prayer

The examination of a prayer routine showed prayer to be a ritualistic practice for respondents such as Amy. She explained the impact this had on her attitude when she went on the pitch:

> As I said before big internationals [it was a] part of my [routine] … keeping it in perspective, it gives me also a good focus on what I'm playing for and why … I find it helps me to be focused and to be grounded and also to … have a balanced approach to the game … It does help me … focus on what's actually really important, yes it might be a big international game but really that reminds who I'm playing for but that really helps me to remember that. So, my faith has really helped and influenced my … participation in sport that way to keep me grounded really and say actually at the end of the day, it's very important but it is just a game. We were created to serve God really on the earth rather than to try and win trophies or medals.

Although not playing rugby union to the same level as Amy, Anglican Jessica, who played to club standard, also highlighted how prayer helped her achieve what she considered to be a more balanced perspective: "I think it just focuses your mind beforehand … you know what you're aiming for … to glorify God in what you do. It just gives you that perspective." Both Amy and Jessica explained how prayer enabled them to achieve a balanced outlook about their sport by directing their attention away from the result to concentrate on their performance and its significance in the light of their Christian faith. This outlook reflects that of Watson and Czech (2005), who advocate that the practice enables athletes to attain a more appropriate perspective

on their life and their sport. A similar observation has been made by Krattenmaker (2010) and Price (2009) regarding the use of religious belief and practices in US sport. This highlights how elite sport can come to dominate athletes' lives and cause them to develop an imbalanced perspective towards it. Religious beliefs and practices including prayer, Bible study and fellowship may help athletes deal with the pressures and material temptations to gain a more appropriate attitude in this regard (Hoffman, 1992c). From the data presented here, it seems that it is not just in elite sport that prayer assists Christian athletes in achieving a more balanced outlook towards their participation in sport and is of value to athletes competing at a wider range of ability levels.

Anglican Neil, who as explained previously, had doubts over the significance of winning in sport, described how prayer had a bearing on his participation in a cricket match:

> If anything, it just gives me peace … that God's in control of things and [that] generally has a big impact on the way I play my sport. … Especially as there's a lot of anxiety when you're preparing to go into bat, it just calms me down a bit. I'm still nervous but still it helps me to be at peace again when I get out and I'm frustrated and angry for maybe twenty minutes, half an hour. There comes a point where the perspective and everything comes back in, and I look at the big picture.

Evangelical Christian Michelle articulated the influence these prayers had on her participation in a football match:

> Before I was a Christian if I played badly and lost, I'd be devastated. It [prayer] helps me keep things in perspective and … it helps me enjoy it more because I know where it comes from and it's not all … completely dependent on me. … If I've got an important game before I'd just stress about it. I'd think, "Have I done everything possible?" … I think if anything I … try more but worry about it less … in terms of the end result. I just think … in the Bible it says whatever happens happens for the good. … So, … in a big match, … "OK, I'm gonna try my best, if we lose that's what's meant to happen." … So, in sport it just takes a big weight off you.

Non-denominational Christian Jack was another respondent who recognised the role prayer played in enabling him to achieve a more objective approach to triathlons on the international stage:

> The pressures are great in sport. There can be a great attachment to results, particularly an emotional attachment … and self-confidence and self-belief become attached to success. I'm less affected by this because ultimately God is in control. This puts me in different and better position, … I feel my emotional state rests in God and my faith, and this is a strong place to be in.

It seems that like Amy and Jessica previously, Neil, Michelle and Jack came to see their sport from a different perspective from the practice of prayer. For them however, there was a different interpretation to their more balanced perspective. They expressed a belief that God had an influence and control over events whilst they

competed. This resulted in them feeling less pressure about their sporting performance and which enabled them to find a more equanimous perspective to their sport. This viewpoint concurs with the findings of Czech et al. (2004) who identified that US athletes who held the belief that God's will is always going to be in their own interests were able to maintain a more composed attitude to the highs and lows of life and sport.

There is further evidence of the value of prayer for athletes from the discipline of sports psychology. Both secondary source studies (Hochstetler, 2009; Maranise, 2013; Watson & Czech, 2005; Watson & Nesti, 2005) and empirical research (Ballard & Wilson, 2017; Park, 2000; Vernacchia, McGuire, Reardon & Templin, 2000) highlight the use of prayer by athletes as a key coping strategy to control stress and reduce tension whilst also encouraging greater focus. The evidence from the research undertaken here not only provides further empirical support to the notion that prayer may help athletes deal with the stress of sporting competition, but it also goes beyond the scope of the existing evidence to show similar findings for UK athletes which, with the exception of one example (Ballard & Wilson, 2017), appear to have been largely absent from the research to date.

Neil and Michelle's interview extracts, also hint at the effect prayer had on their sporting performance. This was something Anglican Joshua, who as explained previously circled a match with prayer, was certain of when discussing how embracing his faith impacted his sport:

> It influenced my mental preparation … and prayer became a part of this. I found it a huge help. … On more occasions I was able to achieve a higher level of performance as a result of my calmer mental attitude.

It was the pressures that Joshua experienced as an international rugby union player that had been the catalyst to him becoming a Christian and which, in turn, had led to Joshua experiencing an improvement in his emotional well-being. He highlights that this positive mental state also resulted in an improvement in his sporting performance. The data presented here supports evidence regarding the positive impact of religious practices and interventions (King, Parker & Hemmings, 2020; Sarkar, Hill & Parker, 2015), and more specifically prayer (Czech et al., 2004; Gamble, Hill & Parker, 2013), on both emotional well-being with its potential to enhance sporting performance. In this sense, they not only uphold the present evidence but show that it extends beyond its existing boundaries. Furthermore, it supports and adds to the suggestions made in the existing evidence for the need to acknowledge the beneficial role religious beliefs and practices can play for Christian athletes not only in terms of sporting performance but also from the perspective of their emotional, spiritual and physical well-being. The benefits to athletes' all-round well-being, in turn, have the potential to positively impact their everyday lives.

Having highlighted previously how respondents utilized prayer to enhance their sporting performance, what the data indicate is that it was the practice of prayer, and the routines athletes adopted in this regard, which benefitted their performance. Through prayer respondents gained a more balanced perspective towards their sport. They developed a positive mental state and a greater capacity to deal with the tensions

and anxieties they encountered. The outcome of which led to a higher standard of performance. This may give some indication as to why prayer was most significant to respondents prior to sport. Before competing, athletes experienced most anxiety and as a result benefitted more from their prayers whilst in the post-sport period with the outcome determined, they experienced less tension and so had little to gain from the practice. This, however, will only be determined through additional research focusing on this matter.

Conclusion

The chapter has explored the relationship between sport and prayer for Christian athletes and highlighted the significant role prayer might play in their sporting lives. It has argued that having consciously established a link between sport and faith through prayer, athletes then sought to use this practice at various times to enhance both their sporting experience but also their performance. Rather than their performance in sport being enhanced through direct prayer requests to perform well, the data indicates that it is the practice of prayer, and the routines athletes adopt, that enable them to achieve a mind-set that is conducive to performing well. In much the same way as the psychological practices used by secular athletes, the prayers of Christian athletes help to promote a mental state that allows them to deal with the uncertainties and anxieties they encounter in competitive sport. Thus, by achieving a calmer psychological state and a more balanced perspective towards their sport the Christian athletes were then better equipped to perform to a higher level.

With the review of literature highlighting the existing knowledge on the use of prayer in sport to be over-reliant on input from US desk-based study and the need to turn to

the discipline of sports psychology for empirical evidence, this chapter as sought to address this matter. As has been highlighted throughout the chapter many of the findings from the featured study concur and uphold with much of the existing literature. It has also reflected and supported that focussing on prayer in the discipline of sports psychology. Furthermore, it has served to extend the existing understanding and knowledge of the relationship between sport and prayer by focusing on athletes from the UK, a group who appear to have been largely overlooked. In addition, it has represented a range of athletes' perspectives by including the experiences of those competing in a broad range of sports, ability levels and Christian traditions. As such, it provides additional evidence concerning the value of prayer and religious practices, not only from their potential to enhance sporting performance but also to promote athlete well-being. Furthermore, it adds to the call for the need for religious beliefs of athletes to be acknowledged and taken into consideration when helping Christian athletes perform at their best in both life and sport.

The data has also brought to light some noticeable differences with the existing research. Firstly, despite the post-sport period being the least popular time for respondents to pray this was a significantly greater practice for athletes here than those of the existing research (Czech & Bullet, 2007). Secondly, whilst respondents here thanked God regardless of the outcome of sport their US counterparts of Czech et al.'s (2004) study confined their gratitude for the outcome of sporting events to the occasions of their success. These apparent discrepancies suggest a need for further research, to confirm the presence and character of these differences to establish a deeper understanding of the phenomena. Having noted in this chapter how prayer helped Christian athletes cope with the uncertainty and anxieties of their participation,

the discussion now turns to an element of sport that contributes to these issues, that of competition.

Chapter 8: Competition and the Christian Faith

Introduction

In considering one of the key areas in the combining of sport and the Christian faith, that of prayer, the previous chapter has highlighted how some respondents benefitted psychologically from the establishment of prayer routines which, in turn, benefitted their overall sporting performance. Seeking to enhance performance by praying to win showed itself to be a contentious issue for respondents given that in praying for their own success they, in effect, put their personal needs first, an ethos at odds with Christianity. Yet, a commitment to self in the desire for success is the nature of competition and something that an initial analysis of the data revealed respondents both enjoyed and embraced. This apparent contradiction is explored in the initial stages of the present chapter as the discussion begins to unpack the respondent perspectives on competition and how this aligns with their sporting contexts. This leads to an examination of some of the issues which respondents encountered when negotiating the culture of competitive sport. Consideration is given to some of the moral and ethical boundaries which Christian athletes must navigate when taking part in competitive sport and the various rationales in play. The chapter concludes with an examination of moral and ethical decision-making amongst professional athletes. The chapter commences by highlighting the controversial nature of competition for Christians.

Competition and the Christian Athlete

Competition lies at the heart of sport and evidence from the interviews indicated that respondents relished this aspect of their participation in sport. Jeff, who played rugby

union in the first division of the English National League, could not have been any clearer on this: "I love competition." Similar sentiments were expressed by semi-professional footballer and evangelical Christian Nigel: "I loved it. I think it's great. … I love competition, … I love winning, I very much dislike losing as most people do but … I love competition." Likewise fellow evangelical Christian Grant, a tennis player for his local club, took pleasure in this aspect of sport: "I enjoy it [competition]. Some are built to be competitive people and that's fine." What is clear from these sentiments is that these respondents enjoyed competition. Furthermore, there appears to be the suggestion that the competitive spirit is an inherent part of their personality and character. The Cambridge Dictionary defines competition as "a situation in which someone is trying to win something or be more successful than someone else." It appears then that respondents here take delight in an activity whose aims run contrary to, and in conflict with, those of the Christian faith. As Hoffman (1992a, 2010) has noted, competitive success demands a level of self-interest, a requirement antithetical to those of the Christian faith which emphasises the needs and well-being of others (Hoffman, 1992a & 2010). Meeting the demands of competition necessitates that individuals must, a least for the duration of the event, put aside the feelings of their opponent. If individuals were to take into account the requirements of the Christian faith whilst competing and begin to show concern for a rival's feelings rather than their own interests, the very essence of competitive sport would be diminished.

Furthermore, it is unlikely to be greeted with much enthusiasm from both team-mates and opponents who understandably participate in the belief that others take part with the intention to succeed. This creates something of a paradox for athletes given that they are faced with the impossible task of following both the dictates of Christianity by

putting others first and those of sport with its focus on self. Hoffman (2010), along which others such as Harvey (2014) and Treat (2015, 2018), suggest competition to be the most difficult element of sport for Christians to negotiate. As highlighted, respondents here expressed great delight in the competitive element of their sport. To gain further insight into this paradox the chapter now moves to an examination of respondents' wider understandings of competition.

Perspectives on Christianity and Competition

In explaining his love of competition, Grant indicated a belief that this was intrinsic to his make-up. He was not alone in this view and analysis of the data identified that other respondents expressed a similar deeply held perspective. Lifelong Anglican Jessica, who played rugby union to club standard, succinctly expressed this: "I think it's alright. I think it's natural. Yeah, I think … God created us with a competitive spirit then … as long as what happens on the pitch stays on the pitch." Premier league hockey player Ryan, despite acknowledging the difficulties competition posed for Christians, also attributed his desire to be competitive to God:

> It's hard because competition is kind of like me saying I'm better than you and that's not really a nice Christian thing to be saying. … So, competition is really interesting but … I absolutely love competition. I think … God definitely made competition as part of us … but it's definitely a very difficult thing to deal with and to be responsible with because it can divide people, "I'm better than you, I've beat you, I'm more of a man than you", or whatever, isn't the kind of thing to be saying to someone but it [competition] is fantastic.

A delight in competition was also expressed by Anglican Chloe, who played tennis and football to county and university standard respectively: **"**I love being competitive, can't think God would make me this way if it wasn't for a reason." Jessica, Ryan and Chloe demonstrate a belief that being competitive, rather than being a conscious choice on their part, is a part of God's intention for them as humans.

In one sense, these respondents appear to suggest that they take no personal responsibility for their desire to compete, attributing it to God. Sport, therefore given its nature, provides a means for athletes to not only compete but also to fulfil something which they believe God intends them to do, thereby supporting previous offerings on this subject (Treat, 2015, 2018; Null, 2008). Treat (2015, 2018) argues that humans play sport because they were created with a natural instinct to play. He refers to this as the cultural mandate. This means developing God's creation. For him, this has resulted in the natural instinct of play developing into competitive sport. By the same token, a human desire to compete is also expressed by Null (2008) in his consideration of professional sport as a vocation for Christian athletes. He argues that Christian athletes compete to express who they truly are and to experience both a feeling of physical and spiritual aliveness that comes from performing God-given physical skills.

This view provides respondents with the opportunity to not only justify but embrace the competitive aspects of sport. What this seems to suggest is that in an attempt to reconcile the requirements of their faith with those of their sport, when athletes engage in competition, they adopt multiple perspectives and perhaps multiple selves or identities. By adopting the view that their competitive instinct is innate, and the way

God created them, they are able, in some way, to express their Christian beliefs. At the same time, they are also able to adopt the perspective of secular athletes and put their own needs first as they seek to be successful in sport. It appears then that respondents become selective regarding the expectations of their faith and exempt from some of the behaviours with which it is normally associated. In competitive contexts respondents temporarily suspend the need to care for and put others first as they meet the requirements of sport and strive to prove themselves as superior to others. Ostensibly, the demands of competitive sport appear to exist outside the remit of their faith, and which allows Christian athletes to put to one side some of the tenets of their faith with few, if any, feelings of remorse or guilt. Consequently, meeting the expectations of their faith appears to become less important than meeting those of sport. It is this perspective that plays a significant role in preventing Christians, if they are to meet the demands of their faith to put others first, being precluded from competitive sport, particularly in the present day where significant value is placed upon winning.

A similar attitude to competition has been noted by Hoffman (2010) in his analysis of US evangelical athletes. He outlines how these athletes, in believing competition to be a part of God's divine plan for their lives, view sport as providing a means whereby they can meet the competitive instinct in a culturally acceptable way. As a result, sport is considered a part of God's design. This leads Hoffman (2010) to suggest that in accommodating both competition and faith, athletes appear to temporarily withhold their concerns for others as they pursue their own interests and success. Whilst acknowledging that this occurs within the context of play, and is therefore to some degree illusionary, Hoffman (2010) believes that this attitude is problematic given that

it contradicts athlete identities as Christians and may lead to more troublesome behaviours such as deception and intimidation. To date, Hoffman's (2010) work stands alone in outlining how Christian athletes come to understand competition in relation to the Christian faith. Findings here concur with and support Hoffman's (2010) view, yet in adopting an empirical approach also adds greater depth to the existing discussions by contributing data that speaks to the lived experiences of Christian athletes. Moreover, it extends these discussions to show that this view is not confined to US or evangelical athletes, in that the athletes here represent a different cultural context and a wider population sample. What this research then provides is empirical evidence that athletes, in coming to an understanding of competition, view it to be innate and, like themselves, created by God, an insight which develops the present knowledge in this area.

Like Grant, Jessica, Ryan and Chloe (cited earlier), international and professional ice-hockey player and Anglican Gavin, also suggested that competition was an inherent part of being human: "It's really important. We were made to be competitive, and it makes us want to strive for more, so we become better people." Although international rugby union player and Roman Catholic Amy did not attach an inherency to her sense of competition, she did see it as a significant factor in the necessity for her, as a Christian, to fulfil her potential:

> I see there's nothing wrong with competition, I think it's very healthy … and I think it's a Biblically sound thing to do, to compete and to try and strive to be the best. [I] haven't got a problem with it really … I know I certainly enjoy competition. I'm quite competitive.

Self-development was also at the heart of former world champion field archer and Methodist Melanie's beliefs around competition:

> Sport's about people becoming the best they can be at their chosen sport … that's a teaching encouraged by Christianity. Competition … contributes to this … it pushes people on to be the best they can be. You need to concentrate on improving yourself and you need commitment to do this, but I don't have any problems with the amount of commitment or the focus on myself.

What this group of athletes suggest is that their Christian faith drives the need to develop themselves as humans and so reflect Novak's (1994) suggestion that the drive for excellence and improvement is a natural expression of human beings and one put there by God. Furthermore, they indicate that competition can be of value in helping individuals improve their sporting skills. Respondents are then able, through a process of rationalisation, to shift their focus away from winning to personal development and negotiate what they perceive to be the expectations of both their faith and sport. For them, sport provides an environment for self-development, of which competition plays a key part and becomes justified on this basis. These respondents suggest an interpretation of competition that is more subjective than the traditional definition, which sees competitors strive for ascendancy over their opponents, to one that is used for the purposes of personal development rather than sporting success alone. This mirrors a further perspective put forward by Null (2008) that competition offers an environment for professional athletes to develop their God given sporting skills, which he argues can then be used in the service of God. He

advocates that this context enables athletes to compare their skills with others. This not only provides a standard to strive for, but also enables them to assess and understand the extent of their skills and so determine where their strengths lie and through which they can best serve God. Null (2008) argues that it is a focus on athletic performance rather than sporting achievement which provides a healthy perspective on competition. Respondent sentiment substantiates Null's (2008) view on the value of competition for Christian athletes. Furthermore, they highlight the notion that competition plays a valuable role in meeting the Christian belief in the need to improve and develop as athletes that extends beyond the confines of professional sport.

By suggesting that they see little issue with this approach, Amy and Melanie, offer both an explanation and a defence to this perspective. In doing so, they suggest an awareness of other issues. Melanie, in particular, indicates that this view demands a significant focus on the self. This perspective on competition, although not directly putting the needs of others first, by focussing on the self and personal improvement does not come at the expense of others. Respondents divorce their success from the outcome of the sporting event and although not exhibiting the care and concern for others notionally required by the Christian faith, their success is not tied to their opponents' failure. In these instances, respondents seemed to be selective over the expectations of their faith, giving precedence to what they saw as the need for self-development, a choice that also fits favourably with the demands and culture of sport. In this respect it appears that, in being aware of the potentially conflicting nature of competition with their faith, these athletes looked to find an alternative to the traditional win-at-all-costs perspective on competition with one that aligned more favourably with their faith. By no longer focusing on winning, with its potential to have a detrimental

or diminishing impact on others, and instead focusing on what they believe to be the Christian mandate of personal growth, athletes appear to find a resolution to the contentious nature of competition and that served as a means to justify their participation in sport. However, in making the decision to shift their focus away from traditional notions of competition, and a demonstration of superiority over others, respondents were only able to resolve these tensions in part since this perspective still placed significant focus on the self.

In a comparable way to that identified by Kelley, Hoffman and Gill (1990) in their quantitative research around the relationship between religious orientation and competitive orientation for athletes and non-athletes, the religious beliefs of respondents here seem to impact their attitude to competition. Kelley et al. (1990) demonstrates how a belief in traditional Christian doctrines was a major indicator for participants adopting an attitude to competition that focused on personal goals and standards rather than on the outcome of success in competition. In reinforcing these findings, the data presented here not only supports those of previous scholars but also, by taking a qualitative approach, adds greater depth to existing debate. By drawing on the lived experiences of Christian athletes, the nuanced data not only demonstrates an attitude to competition that stresses personal development, but via a reflexive process on the part of respondents, this attitude continuously informs behaviours and perceptions which in turn influences perspectives of faith and sport.

The data also identified respondents who in striving for their personal development also envisaged similar gains for their fellow competitors. This was highlighted by Jack, an international triathlete and former professional footballer:

> It depends on your approach to competition … if it's done to make you the best you can be, as a kind of goal, that's fine. But not when it's focused on being better than others or achieving a particular prize … you then miss out on the benefits which are more based on being best you can be. It's okay if you're looking to make yourself better as it also makes others better and raises their game.

Non-denominational Christian and National hockey league player Alex, also explained how the value of competition went beyond his own personal development:

> The word 'compete' is from the Latin 'com' and 'petere'. So that means 'to strive together'. … So then 'to compete', 'to strive together' means that if I put in 110%, say I'm competing against the left back and I'm playing right wing, if I try 110% then I'm going to push him that extra bit. So, in doing that, I'm helping him to play really, really well.

In analysing the perspectives of Alex and Jack, like Gavin, Amy and Melanie cited previously, they too adopt an attitude to competition whereby their focus was not on winning but on personal development and self-improvement. Furthermore, they advocated that by giving their best to develop themselves they also enhanced their opponents' performance so that (in theory at least) they too would experience similar growth. This perspective does not confine the positive experience to the winner(s) but provides the potential for all participants to experience a degree of success in terms of personal development and the element of competition plays a significant role in this.

Consequently, this approach would appear to align more favourably with the Christian faith in that it suggests that athletes are genuinely concerned for the development of their fellow participants. These respondents indicate a perspective on competition which reflects the etymological roots of the term which denotes a questioning or a striving together (see, for example, Treat, 2015, 2018; Hyland, 1978; 1988). In his analysis of sport, Hyland (1978, 1985) explains how competition, although on occasions an environment characterised by violence and aggression, also has the potential to lead to friendship as participants co-operate by working towards something that they lack, and which cannot be achieved without other competitors. This sense of enjoyment comes from the struggle between competitors in their striving for success rather than success itself. This relies on all competitors giving their utmost, the enjoyment for all being diminished if participants fail to do so. Consequently, there is a need for all participants to co-operate if joy is to be derived from the activity (see also Null, 2004).

This perspective of co-operation and enjoyment from competing was apparent within the data, particularly by Anglican Catholic Kyle, a semi-professional footballer, who believed that through competition he was able to truly embrace the Christian message of loving others:

> God enjoys our competitive edge. God enjoys us getting into each other … there's nothing better than footballers … when you're fighting and you're scrapping and at the end of it, there's nothing but love there between the players. It really is a nice feeling when you can shake hands after a game. …It really is a

> good feeling, … when you've pushed each other to your limits. … I think God loves that to bits.

Rather than representing a potential source of conflict with their faith, competition, for Jack, Alex and Kyle, becomes a necessary part of it. Nevertheless, although they adopt a perspective that apparently aligns more favourably with Christianity, there is still a significant focus on the self and therefore, a degree of incompatibility. As a result, it stops short of the Christian ethos of servanthood with its giving of the self for the benefit of others. It is this perspective that is advocated by Weir (2008) in his consideration of competition and the role it can play in developing relationships between competitors as they work towards the shared goal of sporting excellence. He outlines how the Christian commandment to 'love your neighbour as yourself' can be applied to the sporting context. In applying this, Weir (2008) argues that opponents would then be viewed as neighbours ideally resulting in a fostering of an attitude of mutual respect in an environment where competitors play fairly and push each other to perform to the optimum. The data provide empirical support for Weir's (2008) theoretical consideration on the value of competition to develop relationships between athletes whereby participants work together to enhance the quality of all competitors. Furthermore, in taking a qualitative approach the findings contribute greater depth to the existing narrative by providing some of the first insights into the perspectives of Christian athletes concerning the role of competition for co-operation and mutual growth.

This section has examined the perspectives of Christian athletes on the competitive element of sport. Respondents expressed a love of competition, believing it to be

innate and a part of them created by God. It seems the competitive environment existed outside the remit of their faith. When competing respondents appeared selective about the requirements of their faith and they put aside the Christian requirement to put others first. In being aware of the potential issues this brings, respondents attempted a resolution by adopting a perspective on competition that contrasts with the traditional view and sees them focus on its value in encouraging self-improvement, something they see as a requirement of the Christian faith. Furthermore, they highlight the potential of competition for not only their own personal development but that of their opponent. However, despite taking a less traditional perspective on the competitive element of sport, the reality of the situation was not without its issues and the discussion now moves to examine this.

Encounters in Competitive Sport

The practical application of a perspective that considered competitive sport to be an opportunity for all participants to experience personal growth was typified by non-denominational Christian George, a former professional footballer. In outlining the part competition played in helping participants strive for their best he revealed:

> The competing and bringing the best out in each other becomes … competing to get one over on somebody … and I think that's sport at a secular level and it's difficult as a Christian not to get caught up in that.

Likewise Evangelical Christian Michelle, who played university level football having previously played cricket to county standard, expressed a similar belief:

> I think competition like is inherently a good thing, but it gets so twisted. … So, I think if it was pure competition and it was literally, you're trying your best against someone else who's trying their best and you just want to get the best out of each other, then that is a good thing, there's nothing wrong with it but that never happens because … "I want to win 'cos I want to be the best because it's about me" and that is what makes it like the mess that it is basically.

George and Michelle indicated that although they viewed competition as an opportunity for the growth of all participants, they acknowledged that this was unrealistic. They fully intended to adopt an attitude to competition that aligned with their faith, yet they recognise that this is alien to the secular environment of sport. Ray articulated a similar mindset:

> If you look at the idea of competition, if you ask anyone what competition is, when England are competing against Sweden, are they striving together to raise the level of performance? Course they're not. … They'll do anything to win.

Consequently, some respondents appeared to find themselves participating in line with a different agenda and with different motivations to other athletes, the outcome of which was that they struggled to uphold their intended attitude to competition. Rather than them having a positive impact on the culture of sport they acknowledged, that despite their best intentions, there were occasions when they could succumb to temptation and become consumed by a desire to win. For these participants, unlike those cited previously, who indicated that they had found a way to negotiate the element of competition with their faith, George and Michelle appeared unable to

reconcile their faith with the competitive element of sport. What appears to be happening here is that both the context and the motivations of the athletes they competed alongside impacted respondent intentions which subsequently caused them to become wrapped up in the norms of secular sport and the desire to win, which was then prioritised over the necessities of their faith.

In line with Hoffman (2010), respondents demonstrate that although they articulated a more morally acceptable process-orientated perspective on competition, the reality was somewhat different. Hoffman (2010) suggests that elite evangelical Christians often look to sports philosophers for a more agreeable definition of competition and one which points to it being the pursuit of the shared goal of excellence. However, he notes this is not necessarily reflected in the culture of US sports. Instead, he suggests evangelical Christianity pays little regard to the more commendable aspects of Christianity such as excellence and giving one's best, and also does little to shun its more dubious qualities such as aggression and deception. Research by Schroeder and Scribner (2006) point to a similar situation. They consider how religion influences the culture of an intercollegiate athletics department at an evangelical Christian college in the US where it was the pursuit of victory rather than victory itself that was most valued. Following their qualitative study, and a mixed methodology comprising semi-structured interviews with 19 campus leaders, observations of cultural events and documentary analysis, Schroeder and Scribner (2006) identify events that both promoted a winning culture, yet which also reduced the possibility of failure, were supported by the institution. In concurring with these findings, the research undertaken here indicates that these issues are not confined to this particular group

of athletes. Furthermore, by drawing on the perspectives of multiple participants from a broader sample it also contributes greater depth to the existing debates.

The complexities of adopting a perspective on competition which aligned more favourably with the Christian faith appeared to be further challenged by the nature of the sport. It was those respondents who participated in the more physical sports that seemed to encounter the greatest struggles. Non-denominational Christian Sinead who played international ice-hockey, a sport which a high degree of physical contact, acknowledged difficulties within her sport:

> I think competition in itself is a natural way of life … and I think it's healthy to have but I think it's the way you conduct yourself in that competition. I think it's fair to have competition … but … not in terms of belittling someone if they lose. … I think it's the way that you conduct yourself in that competition … ice hockey is an aggressive sport. … We are all trained to be physical. … I did play in a lower league once and my standard was so much better than the other girls. It was really difficult because I was being quite aggressive because that's what I'm used to in the higher league and they weren't so they were being kind of pushed over and getting hurt and I thought, "Well … you've got to learn … you shouldn't be playing in the league, if you don't know how to play properly because you should learn how to do that". … I shouldn't stop my aggressiveness because they're not up to that.

Although Sinead acknowledges a tension between faith and sport, this does not seem to lie solely in the physical nature of ice-hockey. Despite the potential for injury, and

her opponents not displaying the same level of aggression, Sinead argued that her sport demanded this level of physicality, and it was the responsibility of her opponents to meet this requirement. Selected because of its highly physical nature and apparent inherent friction with the Christian faith, it was ice hockey that was the focus of Dunn and Stevenson's (1998) study of a local male church hockey league in Canada. They identified participants who, despite competing in an environment where the dominant value system was that of Christianity, played aggressively and seemed to give precedence to sport over faith. Sinead's experiences indicate that a similar prioritization towards the physical demands of sport over the expectations of faith is also evident in a secular environment. This serves to extend the current literature evidencing the more physical sports present greater challenges to the combining of competitive sport and the Christian faith.

Non-denominational Christian and field hockey player Alex, who as indicated previously considered competition to be an opportunity for all participants to develop, expressed similar sentiments to Sinead:

> Competition versus aggression, it's a tight balance especially in physical sports like hockey and rugby and football. … To actually play like really hard and play really fair is a Christian ethic and I think … that's actually your responsibility as a Christian is to be really competitive, to play as hard as you possibly can.

Earlier, Roman Catholic Amy explained how she considered competition as significant in her belief that, as a Christian, she must strive to fulfil her potential. Here she articulates the need to meet the physical demands of international rugby union:

> I think they've learned through the way I've play over years of knowing these girls that they know I don't hold anything back. I'm not a soft player … I'll hit somebody as hard as I can but then on the floor I'll say, "Are you OK? Let's get up and play." It's not something that's directly discussed but … I've tried to be consistent in how I've played so that it's not a surprise after a number of times. The first time they might be hopefully pleasantly surprised … or maybe a little bit shocked. … It links in with … the Biblical principles of doing what you can to the best of your ability. There's no point going into something half-hearted … you're likely to get injured [and] you're likely to not compete in it successfully. … So, … I always try and play within the rules but to the best of my ability so to hit somebody as hard as I can in a legal tackle is perfectly sound in my opinion.

As with the view shared by Sinead, Alex and Amy demonstrated that in addition to the internal tension they experienced between the disparate end goals of competition and faith, at times sport also required them to engage in practices which seem further at odds with their Christian beliefs and principles. Despite the increased risk of physical injury to opponents, these respondents indicated that they embraced the wholly aggressive aspects of sport. In these situations, it could be argued that the expectations of their faith, and the need to consider the well-being of others, came second to those of sport. However, in what appears to be something of a paradox, these respondents indicated that it was faith, and the need to give their best, which was the driving factor behind these behaviours. This resulted in actions which may be considered inappropriate in other circumstances to become legitimised within the confines of sport.

What appears to be happening here is that in addition to the sporting contest, respondents were also engaged in a contest between their perceived expectations of faith and those their sport. By prioritising the need to give their best, they competed in a way that they believed aligned with their faith, a perspective which also enabled them to meet the demands of sport. This decision, however, appeared to place less significance on the well-being of others. It also improved their chances of sporting success and, despite intending otherwise, it could be argued that it was the culture of sport, with its focus on winning, that was the overriding influence in determining their approach to sporting pursuits. From an epistemological point of view, respondent interpretations of situations such as these points to the highly subjective nature of participant worldviews suggesting that each athlete has a highly unique understanding of their identities as both Christian and athlete. This points to the need to avoid assumptions of a single approach to the combining of sport and faith. It is only through research such as that undertaken here, which examines the lived experience of Christian athletes, that the nuances and complexities of the relationship between competition and faith can be further understood.

A similar legitimising of behaviour, otherwise unacceptable beyond the confines of sport, was noted by Stevenson (1991) in his research with Canadian athletes associated with the para-church organisation Athletes in Action. Stevenson (1991) identified a group of athletes who accommodated their Christian beliefs but only to the extent that this did not compromise their sporting performance. Like respondents here, this imposed limitations on the degree to which these athletes expressed their faith and manifested itself in them conforming to what could be the overly physical

demands of sport. In what appears a further analysis of his data, Stevenson (1997) noted that there were those amongst his respondents who not only conformed to the physical demands of their sport but, in believing that their faith demanded that they gave their all, intensified their efforts and aggressive behaviour and legitimised such behaviours on this basis. Indeed, the Canadian athletes of Stevenson's studies believed that by meeting the demands of their sport they also met those of their faith.

A similar finding was also identified by Kretschmann and Benz (2012b) in their study of the moral values and beliefs of Protestant and Catholic German Christian athletes. Despite expecting the level of physical contact in some sports to cause difficulties for Christian athletes, Kretschmann and Benz (2012b) found this not to be the case. The key factor being the athletes' intentions and providing any resulting physical harm was not deliberate, this behaviour was not problematic. For them, physical contact was legitimised on the basis that it was a part of sport. The findings presented here support this, contributing evidence from an alternative cultural context that the practice of Christian athletes becoming involved in overly physical behaviour, and thereby appearing to prioritise the demands of sport over faith, extends the current scholarship. Despite embracing the physical demands of sport, which seemingly conflicted with their faith, there were limits to the practices respondents were prepared to engage in when competing and it is to a consideration of this that the discussion now turns.

Moral and Ethical Boundaries for Christian Athletes

The desire to win in sport can result in athletes engaging in practices such as cheating, fouling, gamesmanship, etc., that appear to go beyond the rules. This was an area of sport that was raised by some respondents, and they outlined the moral and ethical

boundaries they faced. As indicated previously, Roman Catholic Amy was happy and, indeed, felt it her responsibility as a Christian to meet the demands of her sport. This meant she embraced the aggressive practices of international rugby union, behaviour which was within the rules of her sport. However, there were limits to the practices in which she would engage:

> In terms of… personal character, I think, which is displayed in how you play on the pitch … in terms of integrity, of sportsmanship and lack of gamesmanship … for example, a kind of cajoling someone to lose their temper. … I always maintain I always try and play within the rules … but to the best of my ability … I'd be much happier doing a 100% committed tackle … much better than trying … to be sneaky and maybe cheat … try and get offside or cheat by gouging somebody in the eye.

Like Amy, Anglican Joshua had also played international rugby union. He, too, explained his intention: "I have no problem with competition. I play sport to win as long as it's within the rules of the game." Evangelical Christian Michelle, also participated in a physical sport and represented her university at football. She explained:

> I wouldn't feel happy with cheating and so in terms of … just stupid little things like, claiming a throw in that's not yours and like deliberately fouling people, other people might think I do but I don't. … Some people might think it malicious, but I wouldn't feel comfortable if someone said to me "Look go and kick that player." I wouldn't feel comfortable doing that.

It appears from these extracts that there was a limit to the behaviours the respondents would engage in when competing. By participating willingly in rugby union and football they indicate that they were happy to embrace the level of physicality demanded, a physicality which was determined by the rules of each sport. Indeed, these rules appeared to dictate all aspects of respondent behaviour. They acknowledged that there were other practices, which went beyond the rules, and which could improve their chances of success, but which gave them a sense of unease. For these athletes, it seemed that playing fairly and with integrity was the extent to which their faith set the moral boundaries which they were not prepared to exceed. Beyond this, although it was each respondents' decision whether they carried out the actions demanded of their sport, which may seem to conflict with their faith such as boxing, they allowed the rules of their individual sport, rather than faith, to set parameters for their behaviour. For example, Amy and Joshua were permitted by the rules of rugby union to physically handle their opponents when tackling, an action which for Michelle, as a footballer, would be considered contrary to the rules of the game. Rather than making their own decisions in the light of their faith as to the moral boundaries when competing, it appeared then that respondents chose to let the rules of their sport set the limits of their behaviour. It could be argued that, in effect, it was sport, not faith, which determined the moral and ethical boundaries of their participation. Furthermore, the basing of moral boundaries on fairness and integrity simplified a complex area for athletes. By adopting this perspective respondents were seemingly able to accommodate their faith whilst still meeting the demands of their sport.

It was a similar establishing of the ethical and moral boundaries from the rules of sport that is highlighted by Hoffman (2010) in his analysis of US sport. He notes how

evangelical Christian athletes elevated the rules of sport to the extent that they had moral authority over their behaviour, a practice that also had the advantage of taking away the necessity for athletes to make their own ethical decisions. Consequently, participating in a way that represented their faith required no more than keeping to the rules and a display of human decency, something that, in effect, is expected of all competitors. Findings from this research also reflect the empirical work of Kretschmann and Benz (2012b). They identified how some German Christian athletes felt the need to keep to the written rules of sport and play fairly. The athletes in their study played to win and experienced little internal conflict with the level of physicality permitted within the rules of their sport. It was with practices that went beyond the rules of sport that faith began to impact on moral and ethical decision making and prevented athletes engaging in behaviour and actions that could improve their chances of success. In concurring with both Hoffman (2010) and Kretschmann and Benz (2012b), the data here not only supports the existing evidence but also serves to indicate that the written rules of sport are one of the primary means through which Christian athletes determine the moral and ethical boundaries.

Not all respondents, however, used the rules of their sport to determine acceptable behaviour when competing. Previously non-denominational Christian Alex explained how he felt it was his responsibility as a Christian to embrace the physical aspect of hockey. He also highlighted how, when competing in the National league, there were challenges to this:

> The difficulty is that where competition can spill over into aggression and … in a way that is unfitting for a Christian. Maybe a challenge happens, and it gets a bit

> hairy, and one bloke punches another bloke, or someone has just whacked you off the ball. How do you respond to that? Do you whack him back just to let him know you won't be trampled over? So, when it comes into that kind of aggression, that's difficult.

Alex outlined a level of physicality that was clearly outside the regulations of sport. Despite the situation calling for behaviour that contrasts with the Christian faith, he does not instantly dismiss such physical violence. A similar tension with the expected level of physical contact experienced by Alex was noted by Kretschmann and Benz (2012b). They highlight how German Christian athletes experienced little difficulty with the bodily contact required in some sports, since it was part of the game, but how in the more physical sports athletes found it difficult to avoid excessive aggressive behaviour. The convergence of the Alex's experiences with those of Kretschmann and Benz (2012) appears to evidence a pattern between that of the present research and the existing evidence, which points to the potential for conflicts between competition and faith with the level of physicality of some sports.

The temptation to go outside the rules was not confined to the physical aspect of sport. Evangelical Christian Nigel, a goalkeeper in semi-professional football having previously played professionally, was also unsure of the practices he would engage in his desire to succeed:

> To be honest the perfect Christian would sit here and say … if the ball crossed the line, I'd hold my hands up and I'd tell the referee it had crossed the line but

> … I honestly don't know. … I guess the right thing to do is say I would come clean, but I honestly don't know it's all part … of the game.

Like Nigel, Anglican Catholic Kyle also played semi-professional football having previously played professionally. He too indicated practices he became involved in beyond the rules:

> What is a professional foul? … It is part of football unfortunately. … Your job is to win the game. If you've got your … fans going for you and you're going, "Oh … no, it wasn't a goal." "We want to win, we don't care about that, we want to win!" … I wind the referee up and … I'll bend the referee and I'm very good at it. … Some of them are just unbelievably bad but … because I'm nice to them and I talk to them and I bend them, … get [them] on your side, … manipulate the referee. They're … like putty sometimes but … the opposition is going to try and do it as well and so because they're doing it, I've got to do it. … To make it a level playing field. You see … that's the element of competition, we lie as players even though some people may frown on it, we don't because it's part of the game.

These extracts indicate that a desire to win had the potential to tempt respondents to engage in practices, that although outside the rules of the games in question, appeared to be an accepted part of sport. Although these actions were not legally permitted, they appeared to be part of the unwritten rules of which all participants were aware. Consequently, if athletes were not to be at a disadvantage, they needed to embrace similar practices. Perhaps not surprisingly, they experienced a degree of internal tension as they sought to combine faith and the element of competition. When

it came to their participation in sport, this tension had to be resolved and this necessitated either the foregoing of some of requirements of either faith or sport. Respondents indicate that it was the demands and expectations of their faith which were suspended in order to meet those of their sport. As a result, they appeared to separate their Christian identity from their sport and compete primarily as athletes. A similar setting aside of Christian beliefs by athletes was indicated by Hoffman (2010) in his appraisal of US sport. He suggests that there are evangelical Christian athletes who, in seeking their own success, put aside their concern for others and in effect temporarily ceased to be Christians. He goes on to speculate that this could lead to athletes displaying more disturbing attitudes such as animosity, ruthlessness and a desire to dominate. He explains how many successful athletes in their desire to win develop a killer instinct, which could be driven by hate, a mentality which sits in stark contrast to the Christian faith with its focus on love.

The separating of Christian beliefs from athletic performance in the present research also reflects empirical research in Canada by Stevenson (1991; 1997) and Hoven (2016). Stevenson's (1991; 1997) studies identified Christian athletes who, on occasion, separated their Christian identity from their athletic identity. Although the Canadian athletes intended to maintain their Christian identities when competing, in practice, priority was given the values of sport. The demands of elite level sport, with its win-at-all-costs culture, caused them to engage in behaviours that went beyond the written rules of their sport, but which improved their chances of success. Hoven's (2016) more recent qualitative research considers how Canadian students, aged 15 years, used their faith to inform their actions in competitive sport. He notes that although students made links between their faith and their competitive involvement,

the connection ceased to exist when it came to winning. Hoven (2016) identifies how some students became consumed by the competitive sporting atmosphere which caused them to deliberately segregate their desire to win from their faith and become involved in practices, such as aggressive behaviour and gamesmanship, that although a part of sport did not align with their faith. In identifying a similar suspension of the demands of their faith, the respondents featured here support both the work of Stevenson (1991, 1997) and Hoven (2016).

Yet, although concurring with Hoffman (2010), Hoven (2016) and Stevenson (1991, 1997), these findings contrast with those of Kretschmann and Benz (2012b) who indicate that the rules of sport were the moral limit for the German Christian athletes in their study and behaving wrongly on purpose was unacceptable. They further note how this was the distinguishing characteristic of Christian athletes from their secular counterparts. These athletes accepted the limits imposed by the written rules and were not prepared to exceed them, their prime concern being to play fairly and with integrity. What the present data, along with the existing evidence, appears to indicate is that the moral boundary for Christian athletes is something of a contested issue. The discussion here has identified respondents who allowed the sporting context and its rules to determine the limits of acceptable behaviour, and from which they would not stray, regardless of whether this caused them to behave in ways that appeared to conflict with their faith. Yet, there were others who were prepared to engage in practices, that although beyond the rules, were an accepted part of sport. It seems then that just like all athletes, Christian athletes also have differing attitudes and perspectives on acceptable behaviour when competing. In doing so, the study not only aligns with the existing evidence but also serves to broaden the existing debates

to reveal that the contested nature of the ethical boundaries for Christian athletes is more widespread than that of the countries studied so far. This was not the extent of the concerns respondents faced when determining their behaviour when competing, the matter was further complicated for those athletes who made a living from their sport, something the chapter now explores.

Professional Sport and the Christian Athlete

For the professional athletes in this study, the issues they encountered in combining their faith with competition became intensified by the fact their livelihood was dependant on their sporting success. Earlier in the discussion it was highlighted how Evangelical Anglican Catholic Kyle, who had in the past earned his living from playing football, was prepared to go beyond the rules when competing. Here he clarifies his reasoning:

> The actual sport itself is brilliant … If I'm aggressive and horrible and effin' and blindin' [swearing], I don't think that's a bad thing mainly because I'm doing what I'm paid to do. I play to win and win at all costs, I'd cheat in order to win, I wouldn't hesitate. … If I was playing someone at tennis … I wouldn't cheat to win. … I'd tell you the truth. … I'd play to win but in football I'd do anything to win because that's my job, … 'cos there's more on the line. … I'm not there to … be nice, I'm not there to even be a Christian, even though I am, I'm there to win the game.

Kyle was clear in his attitude when playing professional sport, he was obliged, given it was what he was paid to do, to do his upmost to win. This seemed to legitimise behaviours that, in recreational sport, he would not consider appropriate. For Kyle,

the guiding factor in his decision-making when playing professional sport were determined on the basis of prioritising behaviours which enhanced his chances of success. In competitive situations the need to win transcended all other requirements, this included those of his faith but also the rules of sport. When deciding on his actions it was the demands of professional sport rather than his faith that impacted his behaviour. Unlike amateur athletes, the complexity of combining sport and faith seemed to be made easier for Kyle as a professional in that he had a clear criterion upon which his decision-making took place regarding his behaviour. He needed to win and anything that detracted from this, including his faith, could not be taken into account.

Non-denominational Christian George, like Kyle, had also played professional football but lacked Kyle's level of certainty when it came to determining the behaviours he would carry out to meet the demands of professional sport. However, he did indicate the tensions he faced regarding the extent to which he would be prepared to push the boundaries of his sport in order to win:

> Sport's just so competitive now. There's so much money involved in it. … How far can you take it? If the referee gives a free kick, … do you automatically go back ten yards or do you stand where you are? If you kick the ball out, do you shout and say it's your ball or do you not? … It's very difficult. … Maybe not so much now because I'm playing at a level where it's more an enjoyment.

It was not just professional football that proved challenging to respondents' behaviour, Anglican Neil described the tensions he faced as a cricketer:

> I feel it's [competition] a good thing, obviously it brings out a lot of emotions in people, ups and downs. … I probably find it harder to show no emotions like in times of getting angry … I probably find it harder … sometimes when I feel I've tried my hardest and there's other times when I think "Why have I played that shot?" and I'm so angry with myself, chuck my bat or whatever, I don't chuck my bat, … just show frustration. … Part of the reason I'm probably like that with my own performances is because it's professional, it's my career. I think if I was just playing socially, it wouldn't be as bad. So that's probably one of the hardest things I find about playing professional sport is that … your livelihood, your living depends on it.

Unlike Kyle and George who indicated that the practices they would carry out in order to win were influenced by playing at a professional level, for Neil, it was the pressure to succeed that caused him to display emotions he believed he would not exhibit if he was playing sport for recreational reasons.

The evidence from these interview extracts indicates that for professional athletes, their motivation for competing went beyond the aims of, and opportunities that came from, sport. Unlike amateur athletes their involvement amounted to more than a desire to win and any enjoyment, opportunities for friendship, improving skills, etc., that competitive sport provided. Being successful in sport was fundamental to their financial security and therefore a necessity for their day-to-day living. This brought a greater incentive to win which had a significant impact on both their attitude to competition and their behaviour when participating in their sport. The key factor in

determining both their attitude and behaviour were the demands of professional level sports and the need to win. This seemed to override not only the requirements of their faith but could also override the rules of sport.

Furthermore, they each revealed that if they played their sport for reasons other than supporting themselves, and possibly their families, the likelihood is that they would have behaved differently. It seems that it was their necessity to meet financial responsibilities which caused them to behave in ways that contrasted with their faith. For these respondents, success went beyond winning and could be the difference between meeting their everyday needs and financial struggles. In effect their prospering in life was dependent on their prospering in sport, the two being inextricably linked. This brought added pressure and a temptation to behave in ways that were at odds with their faith. Respondents indicated that it was the need to prevail in life that forced them into habits that conflicted with their faith. Nevertheless, it was by striving for the goals of sport that they enhanced their chances of financial security. Although it seems athletes did not perceive it to be the case, this could appear to put the demands of professional sport above those of faith. For these athletes, unlike their amateur counterparts, winning had a direct impact on their daily life. What seems to be happening here is that these athletes experienced added pressure to succeed and the conflicts they experienced between the requirements of faith and sport intensified to such an extent that they became a struggle between those of day-to-day living, which they fulfilled through sporting success, and faith. When faced with such a conflict they indicated that they had little choice but to meet the needs of everyday life. However, what their actions might also suggest is that the demands of sport, are once again, prioritised over those of their faith.

This finding reflects Hoffman's (2010) beliefs that the higher the level of competition the more likely it is that athletes will engage in unethical behaviour. He suggests that when money becomes involved and winning takes on more significance, less thought is given to competing in an acceptable way. A similar outcome was noted by Beller, Stoll, Burwell and Cole (1996) in their research into the influence of religious education courses on moral reasoning in athletes and non-athletes in liberal arts colleges in the US. Their studies led them to conclude that competition is neither good nor bad, but that it is the emphasis placed on winning above all else that negatively affects moral reasoning and development. This is further supported by Kretschmann and Benz (2012b) in their study into the moral values of Christian athletes in competitive sport. They observed that athletes competing at the higher levels of sport, where there was more money involved, were under greater pressure to succeed. This had a detrimental effect on their moral reasoning. In concurring with the findings of Hoffman (2010), Beller et al. (1996) and Kretschmann and Benz (2012) the present data contributes more depth to the existing evidence in this area. Furthermore, it serves to broaden the conversation to reveal that the significance of winning and its detrimental effect on moral behaviour is limited to neither US nor Germany, the athletes here representing a so far unreported cultural and social context.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the relationship between Christianity, which puts the needs of others at its heart, and competition and specifically winning, a pursuit which is focused on personal success often to the detriment of others. What has been revealed is that the respondents clearly enjoyed competing and sought to justify this by

advocating for its inherent nature and by looking to an alternative faith-based perspective which aligned more favourably with their religious beliefs. The reality of maintaining this perspective proved challenging and athletes could find themselves drawn into the winning orientated culture of sport. They faced an ongoing tension between the requirements of their faith and those of sport and when faced with such a dilemma sport was often given precedence over faith. On the occasions when consideration was given to faith, the behaviour exhibited by respondents appeared to favour the tenets of Christianity which met with the culture of sport, and which did not compromise their sporting performance. Sport also determined the limits and extent of acceptable behaviour and appeared to exist in a separate realm with behaviour, which would be frowned upon in everyday life, being legitimised within this context.

What the data here indicate is that, in line with the existing evidence, the relationship between competition and Christianity is complex. Furthermore, it has revealed that in seeking a resolution to many of the conflicts respondents invariably seemed to prioritise sporting considerations over faith. It seems that in seeking to find a way of combining faith with the element of competition, athletes reconfigured the requirements of their faith to fit in with sport which remained largely unchanged. Additionally, it has suggested the need for further research into the potential for sport to develop relationships between athletes and how the more physical sports, where there is a greater potential for conflict, meets with the Christian faith. It is from these perspectives that the findings discussed here have contributed to the existing debates into the relationship between competition and the Christian faith and thereby help to extend the research in this area. Following the chapters that have examined how Christian athletes navigate and negotiate the demands and expectations of

competitive sport through evangelism, worship and prayer, this discussion has focused on the contentious issue of competition. The thesis now turns to the final chapter and the conclusions that can be drawn from the empirical evidence as well as recommendations for future research.

Conclusion

Introduction

The study sought to understand the relationship between sport and faith for Christian athletes. To achieve this goal, it explored the experiences of UK-based Christian athletes in competitive sport. This led to an examination of how Christian athletes combined competitive sport with their Christian faith, the issues which athletes encountered in aligning their Christian worldview with their participation in sport and the strategies that athletes adopted in order to resolve these issues. The study aimed to build upon and extend the existing knowledge in this area, which at present is dominated by a North American perspective and most notably that of evangelical Christians at the elite level (e.g., Hoffman, 2010; Krattenmaker, 2010). Although in recent times there has been a significant increase in interest in the relationship between sport and the Christian faith (Daniels & Parker, 2023; Jones, Parker & Daniels, 2020; Treat, 2015) this interest has not manifested itself in empirical research (Watson & Parker, 2014). This points to the need for primary research with attention focused the lived experiences of Christian athletes in competitive sport. Furthermore, consideration also needs to be given to the perspectives of athletes from different cultural contexts and a wider range of sports, ability levels and Christian denominations. Research which meets these needs would deepen the existing understanding of the relationship between sport and Christianity and the potential this understanding brings for practitioners in the fields of both sport and faith to assist Christian athletes as they endeavour to live out their faith in the environment of competitive sport.

This chapter brings the findings of the study together and begins by summarising the various findings in the light of the research question and objectives regarding the experiences of Christian athletes in competitive sport. It then moves to acknowledge the limitations of the project before proposing recommendations for future research to further deepen understanding of the relationship between sport and a Christian worldview. The chapter closes by highlighting the conclusions that have been drawn from the study in light of the objectives of the research.

Summary of Approach and Findings:

Employing a constructionist ontology and interpretivist epistemology, this qualitative study sought to examine the experiences of UK-based Christian athletes, a group so far under-reported in the literature, of integrating faith with sport. In total 25 participants, representing a range of sports, ability levels and Christian denominations, were recruited for the study and data regarding their experiences of the sport-faith interface was collected through a process of semi-structured interviews. Data highlighted the significant areas in the relationship occurred in terms of evangelism, worship and prayer and competition.

Sport as Evangelism: With all but one of the athletes aiming to share the Christian message, the opportunity sport brought for evangelism was a key area in their combining of sport and faith. With this finding evidencing sport as evangelism extended beyond elite evangelical North American sport (Coakley, 2016; Hoffman, 2013; Stevenson, 1991, 1997) one might assume sport as evangelism is a widespread practice for Christian athletes. The undertaken research also provided new insight that a desire to share their faith could be a motivating factor in the Christian athletes'

participation in sport whilst also indicating that it is not just fans and spectators (e.g., Aitken, 1993; Hoffman, 1992a; Krattenmaker, 2010) with whom the athletes seek to share their faith but extends to their fellow athletes.

Some elite level athletes believed they were ‘called’ to their sport for the purpose of evangelism, an interpretation which justified their participation in sport. This finding provided first-hand evidence to support the theoretical literature. Firstly, it evidences this sense of calling extends beyond North America and the evangelical tradition and the possible implication that this is a widespread belief held by Christian athletes. Furthermore, rather than the shared characteristics between sport and the ‘Protestant Work Ethic’ being the foundation to this ‘calling’ (Coakley, 2016; Eitzen & Sage, 1993), it was for the purposes of evangelism. The findings supported Null’s (2008) proposition that it is the sporting abilities of elite Christian athletes rather than God’s unconditional acceptance that defines their participation in sport and also the performance-based identity that is adopted by some elite Christian athletes (Daniels & Parker, 2023; Jones, Parker & Daniels, 2020).

Athletes adopted both explicit and implicit approaches to share their faith. An explicit strategy saw athletes engage with the sporting community with the intention of discussing their faith, a finding which showed this approach extended beyond the elite evangelical North American athletes (Coakley, 2016; Hoffman, 2013; Stevenson, 1991) and from which one might deduce to other cultural contexts. Through a deeper examination of this explicit approach, the findings identified how athletes proclaimed their faith with the intention of a response which they then sought to take advantage of by challenging others with their beliefs. Athletes explained an excessively

enthusiastic approach could cause a negative reaction and an instant rejection of the message. This strategy, and the response it generated, although outlined in the theological literature (Costas, 2008; Bevans & Schroeder, 2004), provided new insight into the area of sport as evangelism.

Further original insight came with the identification of an implicit approach to evangelism in sport, an approach also outlined in the theological literature (e.g., Bevans & Schroeder, 2004, Bosch, 2008; Chilcote & Warner, 2008; Newbigin, 2008). Christian athletes placed emphasis on their actions and behaviours, which they sought to align with their words and an authentic delivery of the Christian message. Although there is existing evidence showing the importance Christian athletes attach to behaviour (Stevenson, 1991), this finding shows the importance extends beyond Canadian elite evangelical athletes and the possible supposition of broader cultural settings. The aligning of actions and words proved challenging in a competitive environment given the inherent conflict between the demands and expectations of sport and faith causing athletes to switch off from being Christians to conform to the success orientated culture of sport, a finding which showed this separation of sport and faith by Christian athletes is more widespread than indicated in the existing research (Hoven, 2016; Stevenson, 1991), with the plausible assumption to further afield.

In attempting to compensate for this, the athletes sought to take advantage of the social opportunities that came with their sport. This environment was more conducive to athletes aligning their actions with their words and generating the discussions they sought regarding their faith. By meeting the needs of their faith by sharing the

Christian message in a social context, athletes were also able to meet with the winning culture of sport. The athletes' resolution to the issues they encountered in the competitive environment caused a relocation of sport as evangelism to the social opportunities provided by sport.

Sport as worship: A significant theme in the athletes' approach to the combining of sport and faith came in the context of worship. This concurred with and added support to the notion of sport as worship evident in the existing literature (e.g., Coakley, 2016; Ellis & Weir, 2020; Hoffman, 2010), and one may deduce that this is a regular practice for Christian athletes. With sporting pursuits and corporate worship often occurring simultaneously, athletes attended traditional Sunday worship when free of sporting commitments. Consequently, participation in sport dictated to their presence at corporate worship. Rather than experiencing the congruence between Sunday worship and sport, suggested by Ellis and Weir (2020), UK respondents experienced tensions and a situation that required their physical presence at sporting events and traditional forms of worship simultaneously. Respondent experiences were similar to those highlighted by Linville (2016) in his explanation of the struggle US Christian athletes have with participation in sport and church attendance. Thereby indicating these difficulties extend beyond the US context and the elite level and with the plausible assumption to further afield. Athletes experienced greater difficulties with forgoing corporate worship than competing on a Sunday. Consequently, they provided first-hand evidence to support Ellis' (2012, 2014) observations of the cultural change Sundays have undergone and, once dominated by religion, this day is now dominated by sport.

Overcoming the tensions athletes experienced between traditional worship and participation in sport, athletes met what the athletes perceived to be their Christian responsibility to worship through their participation in sport, a finding which shows this approach is not confined to elite evangelical Christian athletes (e.g., Hoffman, 1992a, 2010; Ellis & Weir, 2020; Stevenson, 1997). Worship was no longer restricted to a church building but relocated to a sporting environment. In further congruence with the existing literature (Ellis & Weir, 2020; Smith, 2017; White, 2018) but also evidencing a belief that exists beyond elite evangelical athletes, was the need for sport as worship to be played in a morally and ethically appropriate way.

The worship offered by the athletes differed markedly from traditional interpretations, bearing more of a resemblance to personal devotion, a style of worship that is private in nature and performed alone. This saw the shape and form of athletes' worship being determined by their chosen sport. Athletes were able to negotiate what they saw as the responsibilities of both faith and sport by worshipping through personal devotion in a sporting context. This outcome enabled athletes to rationalise their choice to compete. It was worship, rather than sport, which was the subject of change and worship became indistinguishable from sport. To overcome the issues athletes experienced between attendance at corporate worship and participation in sport, worship was reconfigured to meet the demands and expectations of sport which remained unaltered.

The foundation to a belief in sport as worship came from three main perspectives. Firstly, and in line with the theological literature (Davies, 1994; Earey, 1995; Ellis, 2009; Forrester, Macdonald & Tellini, 1996) athletes held the belief that worship, rather than

being confined to designated times and places, encompassed the whole of a Christian's life. Consequently sport, as a part of their lives, provided an opportunity for worship. Worship for the athletes was not confined to sport but carried over to every aspect of their lives. Athletes provided first-hand evidence to support White (2018) and Treat (2015; 2018) who argue for a sacramental view of the world which sees both creation and human structures bearing witness to God and therefore opportunities for worship. This contrasted with the elite evangelical athletes of Ellis and Weir's (2020) study who referenced sport as the occasions of their worship, thereby pointing to an area in need of greater clarity.

A second perspective on sport as worship saw athletes take a less conventional perspective on spiritual gifts. They believed their sporting skills were God given and therefore of spiritual significance. This led to the belief that these sporting gifts were to be used in worship. The sentiments behind this perspective being that it was by the returning of God given gifts to their origin that individuals offer worship. These findings brought support to the existing evidence (Ellis & Weir, 2020) but also indicated this interpretation of sport as worship extends beyond elite evangelical athletes. New insight on the perspective around God given sporting gifts was a belief that these gifts are bestowed for the purposes of worship.

The third perspective on sport as worship expanded on the belief of sporting skills being God given gifts to highlight the importance of giving one's best. Athletes believed they had a responsibility to nurture their sporting gift to its full potential and to give their all to their sporting performance. Giving one's best to sporting participation caused sport to become an act of worship, demonstrating this perspective

is not limited to elite athletes (Ellis & Weir, 2020; Stevenson, 1997; Aitken, 1993; Hoffman, 1992a & 2010). This enabled athletes to meet the Christian responsibility to worship in a manner that did not compromise their sporting participation. Furthermore, it also provided motivation to improve sporting skills and enhance performance and rather than sport serving worship, worship served sport. Each of these three perspectives further emphasised the move away from traditional worship for the Christian athletes.

Despite viewing sport as worship as a way of overcoming the tensions they experienced between sporting participation and corporate worship, sport as worship was far from straight forward and athletes encountered further issues. Athletes struggled to apply the theory of sport as worship to a competitive sporting environment and expressed uncertainty as to how to carry this out and the behaviour expected of them. This finding not only provided insight into a specific area of the faith-sport interface in which Christian athletes struggled but also the reason for their difficulties and their concerns in that they lacked the necessary knowledge.

Sport and Prayer: With all the athletes praying with respect to their sport, prayer played a significant role in the Christian athletes sporting lives. By praying about their participation in sport athletes consciously sought to establish a link between sport and faith and the athletes adopted a mechanistic process to the combining of prayer and sport. This finding contrasted with that of the existing desk-based evidence (Hoffman, 2011; Price, 2009) which in focusing on the US, suggests that prayer has become absorbed and intertwined into the sporting context and become a part of the very structure of contemporary sport. This contrast points to an area of the sport-

Christianity interface in need of further consideration. Athletes used prayer before, during and/or after a sporting event. It was prior to sport that the athletes were most likely to pray, the significance of prayer diminished as participation in sport began and was least relevant and could be forgotten or neglected afterwards.

There were three main themes to the content of the athletes' prayers. Firstly, and offered most frequently prior to competing, were prayers which focused on sporting performance. These prayers were directed at the athletes playing to the best of their abilities and which could be for the purpose of glorifying God. This led to issues around the notion of praying to win and brought forth a range of perspectives. Most athletes considered praying to win to be morally inappropriate and questions were raised as to the significance of winning. Athletes, who had previously engaged in such prayers, had changed their view and, with their experience suggesting these prayers lacked efficacy, now refrained from the practice. A similar lack of efficacy was the justification for the small number of athletes who were happy to pray for their own success. When it came to the appropriateness of praying to win athletes sought to resolve the issue by making their own individual decisions based on their own experiences and thought processes.

The second theme concentrated on prayers for safety and protection as athletes sought to remain free from injury. These prayers were the domain of athletes competing in the more physical sports such as rugby union and ice-hockey, where there was an increased chance of physical harm, rather than sports such as tennis, running, etc., where there was less physical contact. This finding brought first-hand

evidence of Hoffman's (1992c, 2011) suggestion that the incidence of prayers for safety tends to increase with the physicality of sport.

The final theme focused on prayers of thanksgiving which were prevalent in the post-sport period. These were offered regardless of the outcome, a finding which contrasted with US athletes (Czech et al., 2004) whose expressions of gratitude for the outcome of sporting events were confined to the occasions of their success. This difference points to an area of sport-prayer relationship in need of clarification. The UK-based Christian athletes' expressions of gratitude included the opportunity to compete but also for the many and varied experiences sport provided.

In general, the use of a prayer routine by the Christian athletes both confirmed and added support to existing empirical evidence in the field of sport psychology (Czech et al., 2004; Czech & Bullet, 2007) which focused on US collegiate athletes, and one might deduce to be the case for most Christian athletes. The main exception being prayers after a sporting event when the UK-based Christian athletes attached more significance to the practice than their US counterparts, highlighting an area in need of further examination. Furthermore, the research undertaken here serves to support, but also enhance, the available evidence by providing the first data on the lived experience of Christian athletes on their use of prayer in sport coming from the perspective of the sport-Christianity interface.

In looking to the impact of prayer it was the practice of prayer rather than any direct requests that proved beneficial to sporting performance. This practice, and the routines Christian athletes adopted, encouraged a psychological state that was

conducive to an improved sporting performance. Prayer facilitated both a calmer psychological state and a more balanced perspective towards their sport. This helped athletes cope with the uncertainties and anxieties that came with competitive sport. As a result, the Christian athletes were then better equipped to perform to their potential. Having consciously sought to establish a relationship between sport and the Christian faith through prayer, athletes sought to use this practice to enhance both their sporting experience but also their performance.

The Christian Athlete and Competition: Athletes adopted a range of perspectives in combining of element of competition, with its focus on personal success, and the Christian faith, which focuses on the needs of others. Despite their paradoxical natures some athletes took delight in the competing and attributed their desire to compete to God. Sport provided an environment which enabled them to fulfil what they believed to be an inherent part of their nature, created by God. The experiences of these Christian athletes provided primary evidence in support of suggestions in the desk-based literature (Treat, 2015, 2018; Null, 2008). This view enabled athletes to not only justify but embrace competition. By meeting their God given desire to compete athletes were also able to adopt a sporting perspective and in striving for success put their own needs first. Consequently, for this group of athletes reconciling the requirements of their faith with those of competition caused them to adopt multiple perspectives. Furthermore, the competitive environment existed beyond the remit of Christianity and athletes became selective regarding the demands of their faith, temporarily disregarding the necessity to put others first. With the research drawing on the lived experiences of Christian athletes this outcome provides empirical support to Hoffman's (2010) proposals regarding Christian athletes' perception of competition.

In being aware of and seeking to resolve the potential tensions between Christianity and competition, some athletes adopted an alternative to the traditional winning orientated perspective on competition and one that aligned more favourably with their faith. Rather than focusing on winning, which potentially had a detrimental effect on others, these athletes concentrated on what they believed to be the Christian mandate for personal growth. This evidence derived from qualitative data both reinforced and added depth to quantitative study of Kelley et al.'s (1990) which demonstrated how Christian belief can be linked to an attitude to competition which focuses on personal goals rather than results. By concentrating on self-improvement athletes believed they adhered to the requirements of their faith but also met with the expectations of competitive sport. Indeed, the opportunities competition provided for personal development justified their participation in sport. Competition became a necessary part of the athletes' faith in that it encouraged the self-improvement they believed their faith demanded. The findings in this area brought primary evidence in support of Null's (2008) suggestion that competition provides an environment which enables Christian athletes to develop and improve their God given skills. Furthermore, athletes advocated that this perspective, although not placing others first, did offer similar opportunities for the personal growth of their opponents, a finding which contributes the Christian athletes' perspectives to Weir's (2008) belief that competition encourages co-operation and mutual growth.

Whilst this alternative perspective enabled some athletes to resolve the issues, they encountered in combining faith and the competitive element of sport, for others, tensions remained. The context and the differing motivations of the athletes they

competed alongside impacted the Christian athletes' intentions and they became wrapped up in the norms of secular sport. In succumbing to temptation and consumed by the desire to win these athletes prioritised the necessities of sport over those of their faith. This outcome concurs with existing evidence in this area (Hoffman, 2010; Schroeder & Scribner, 2006) and shows that it is not just Christian athletes of the evangelical tradition that can succumb to the winning culture of sport.

Other athletes' attempts to resolve the issues they encountered between the requirements of faith and competitive sport prioritised giving their best, an approach which they believed met the needs of their faith. This view also met with the demands of sport and improved the athletes' chances of success. A similar attitude was adopted by those competing in the more physical sports where, despite the increased risk of injury to opponents, athletes embraced the aggressive nature of these sports. Although the well-being of others appeared to come secondary to the demands of sport, athletes advocated it was faith, and the need to give their best, which drove this behaviour. Actions normally considered inappropriate were legitimised within the sporting context, a finding which indicated this attitude and approach is not confined to Canada (Stevenson, 1991, 1997) and Germany (Kretschmann & Benz, 2012b) and one might therefore assume to a broader range of cultural contexts. Despite the Christian athletes' intentions, it was the winning culture of sport that was the overriding influence in determining their approach to sport.

Further, issues for the athletes with the element of competition and their faith came with the determining of moral boundaries and once again there were a range of perspectives. For some athletes, the extent to which their faith impacted their

behaviour was in requiring them to compete fairly and with integrity. Beyond this, they relied on the rules of their sport, rather than faith, to set the parameters of their behaviour. This outcome shows this determining of moral boundaries by Christian athletes extends beyond German (Kretschmann & Benz, 2012b) and US (Hoffman, 2010) athletes and one might deduce to athletes of other nationalities. This simplified a complex area and enabled athletes to accommodate their faith whilst still meeting the demands of their sport. Other athletes, in their desire to win and not be at a disadvantage, engaged in practices, although beyond the rules, were an accepted part of sport. This brought a degree of internal tension which athletes resolved by suspending the demands of their faith to meet those of sport. In these situations, athletes separated their Christian identity from their sport and competed primarily as athletes. This evidenced a similar separation between sport and faith existed beyond North America (Hoffman, 2010; Hoven, 2016; Stevenson, 1991 & 1997), implying this might also be the case in other cultural contexts. These differing perspectives both confirmed, and contributed lived experiences from Christian athletes to the existing evidence that the moral and ethical boundaries were far from established and just like all athletes, Christian athletes hold differing attitudes and perspectives on acceptable behaviour when competing. Despite these differing perspectives, it was sport, rather than faith, which determined the moral and ethical boundaries for Christian athletes.

For professional athletes, the combining of sport and faith intensified and became a struggle between their livelihoods, fulfilled through sporting success, and faith. With little choice but to meet the needs of everyday life the athletes needed to conform with the winning culture of sport. This caused them to become involved in attitudes and behaviours which suggested that the demands of sport were prioritised over those of

faith. This finding concurred with and, in providing evidence from an unreported cultural context, extended the existing evidence (Hoffman, 2010; Kretschmann & Benz, 2012b; Stoll, Burwell & Cole, 1996) showing the detrimental effect the significance of winning can have on the behaviour of Christian athletes. From this one might assume this extends to other geographical locations.

The combining of the element of competition and Christianity was a complex task for the athletes, and they encountered conflicts given their paradoxical natures. In seeking a resolution to the issues, athletes invariably prioritised sporting considerations over faith. On the occasions when consideration was given to faith, the behaviour exhibited by respondents appeared to favour the tenets of Christianity which met with the culture of sport, and which did not compromise their sporting performance. When competing athletes reconfigured the requirements of their faith to fit in with sport, whilst sport remained largely unchanged. Having highlighted the overall findings attention now turns to the limitations of the study.

Limitations of the Research

Although there has been a recent increased interest in the relationship between sport and Christianity (Daniels & Parker, 2023; Jones, Parker & Daniels, 2020; Treat, 2015) with contributions from a wider range academic disciplines and aspects of society, this interest has not been reflected to the same degree in empirical research (Watson & Parker, 2014) with little consideration given to the lived experiences of the athletes themselves. Although, more recently there have been some small-scale academic studies in the UK, these have focused primarily on football and examined the pastoral support provided by sports chaplains (Fleming & Parker, 2022; King, Parker &

Hemmings, 2020; Oliver & Parker, 2019; Roe & Parker, 2016). Evidence, more specific to the research undertaken here and the combining of sport and faith by Christian athletes, has concentrated primarily on elite level US sport, an environment consumed by winning and the evangelical Christian tradition (Krattenmaker, 2010). This represents a cultural context which differs significantly to that encountered by UK-based athletes.

Albeit useful, the limited nature of the empirical research and its almost exclusive focus on a specific cultural setting, and one that differs markedly to the environment in which UK-based athletes compete, provided limited scope for the consideration of previous findings. Consequently, this was of limited assistance in researching UK-based Christian athletes' experiences of combining sport and faith. With this providing limit scope for reviewing previous findings, a thematic approach was undertaken to the analysis of data. This identified recurring patterns in the interview transcripts which addressed the intentions of the research (Braun & Clark, 2006, 2021). This process involved the coding of the interviews to identify segments that were significant to the research question. These codes formed the basis for the themes which provided insight into athletes' lived experiences of combining faith and sport.

An additional limitation came from the recruitment of the Christian athletes. With the need to both identify and enlist UK-based Christian athletes, who represent only a small proportion of athletes in this country, support was sought in obtaining access to respondents who would meet the intentions of the study. With the research being conducted with a minority group a gatekeeping strategy was required (Berg, 1999). This necessitated contacting para-church organisations who indicated a link between

sport and Christianity, as well as other Christian organisations. One of the main aims of these para-church organisations is to support Christian athletes as they compete alongside non-Christian athletes. It was these Christian athletes, and their experiences of competing in a secular sporting environment, who were deemed to meet the intentions of the research. This process of recruitment came with the potential for the athletes to reflect the views of the respective organisations although care was taken to ensure that all the respondents were not confined to a single organisation.

Impact of Thesis

Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insights into the lived experiences of UK-based Christian athletes, highlighting how evangelism, prayer, worship and competition presented as common features of respondents' lives in their combining of sport and the Christian faith. That said, these areas were not without their tensions which could result in athletes evidencing actions and behaviours which appeared to contradict their religious beliefs. Ultimately, athletes came to the realisation that if they were to continue competing, the demands and expectations of their sporting lives must be prioritised over their faith-based activities. In accordance with their personal experiences of the sport/Christianity interface, athletes thus resolved these tensions in nuanced ways in line with the expectations and requirements of their faith. In this sense, the research serves to extend the existing knowledge-base into the relationship between sport and Christianity whilst as the same time providing a foundation upon which future research might be carried out. It is to the specific recommendations of the thesis that the chapter now turns.

Recommendations

Whilst acknowledging these limitations, the research does contribute knowledge to the sport-Christianity interface by highlighting how UK-based Christian athletes combine their sport and their religious beliefs, the issues they encounter and how they resolve these issues. Consequently, it evidences how much of the existing knowledge in this area, which predominantly focuses on elite evangelical athletes in North America, extends to the UK cultural context and to athletes of different Christian denominations and sporting abilities. The findings whilst highlighting contrasting areas with the existing evidence and adding new insight to the combining of sport and faith by Christian athletes, also indicate a need for a widening of the overall research agenda which would serve to deepen the understanding of the relationship between sport and a Christian world view. This refers not only to different research methods (qualitative, quantitative, mixed method) into the experiences of Christian athletes but also across a range of sports, both professional and non-professional, in the UK and elsewhere. Furthermore, the findings have implications for para-church and other Christian organisations. In highlighting the issues Christian athletes encounter in combining sport and faith comes the opportunity for these organisations to use this knowledge to put in place support mechanisms to offer help and assistance to the Christian athletes as they seek to live out their faith in the competitive sporting environment. This would serve to ease the combining of sport and faith and enhance the experiences of Christian athletes. The discussion now draws to a close by offering concluding remarks on the findings of the study.

Concluding Remarks

In looking to examine the key areas in how Christian athletes navigate and negotiate the demands and expectations of competitive sport alongside their faith-based activities through the lived experiences of Christian athletes, the undertaken research has identified key areas in the combining of sport and faith, namely evangelism, worship, prayer and competition. In trying to live out their faith in competitive sport athletes encountered several issues which stemmed primarily from the contrasting demands and expectations of competitive sport, with its focus on the self and the Christian faith, which places the needs of others first. In seeking to resolve these issues and meet what they perceived to be the requirements of both Christianity and their sport, athletes invariably gave priority to the expectations of sport over those of faith. Their participation in sport remained largely unchanged and it was the practice of their faith that was often modified and accommodated into the winning culture of sport.

Methodological Reflections

Having reflected upon the research process and the methods used, I believe that those carrying out research into the lived experiences of Christian athletes should consider interviewing respondents on more than one occasion. When transcribing and reviewing each interview I came to the realization that some of the athlete's responses in interview could have been further explored. Additional interviews would provide opportunities for a more thorough examination of the relationship between sport and the Christian faith.

Given the fact that Christian athletes are firstly, very much in a minority in the UK and secondly, not easily identifiable, a gatekeeping strategy was considered to be the best approach to recruiting respondents to the study, i.e., the use of parachurch organisations as a vehicle for participant recruitment. However, this proved to be a time-consuming process especially since that it yielded only a small number of participants. Commencing interviews and using a snowball sampling technique proved much more successful in the recruitment of respondents. Following this logic, and with hindsight, I would have begun the interviewing at an earlier stage once the initial participants were on board and this would have potentially led both to the quicker and easier recruitment of additional Christian athletes to the study.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Guide

SPORT AND THE CHRISTIAN FAITH: THE EXPERIENCES OF CHRISTIAN ATHLETES IN COMPETITIVE SPORT.

Selection of ***possible*** questions/areas designed to address the research question: 'How do Christian athletes navigate and negotiate the demands and expectations of competitive sport alongside their faith-based activities?'

and the aims and objectives of the research:

1. How do athletes combine their participation in competitive sport with their Christian faith?
2. What issues do athletes encounter in aligning their Christian worldview with their participation in sport?
3. What strategies do Christian athletes adopt in order to resolve these issues?

General Information.

Name:

Gender:

Age:

Sport (General Questions):

Sport:

Individual/team:

Standard:

Currently competing/retired:

(e.g. How long have/did you participate in your sport? How did you get into your sport? What have you achieved? What you hope to achieve? etc.)

Christianity (General Questions):

Christian Denomination:

How long have you been a Christian?

Can you tell me something about your faith?

(e.g. How you became a Christian? The history to your faith? Your attendance at church? How often? What activities? Where you feel you are now with your faith? Did you become a Christian as a result of your participation in sport? etc.)

Sport and Faith:

- Do you participate in a religious or secular environment?
- Are you a member of a sporting organisation with religious affiliations?

  If **YES**

  - Which?

- Do you feel you are open about your faith with other athletes or do you adopt a more private approach?

  If **OPEN**

  - What are other sports peoples' reactions to your faith? Do you feel you are treated differently as a result of your faith? Do you think other athletes have different expectations of you as a Christian athlete?

If **YES**

- Can you explain about these expectations?

- Do you think there are extra demands and expectations of you as a Christian athlete that non-Christian athletes are not subjected to?

If **YES**

- Can you explain about these extra demands and expectations?

- Do you feel your attitudes to sport are different to a non-Christians?

If **YES**

- In what way are your attitudes different?

- Do you see your sport and your faith as separate areas of your life or do you see them as linked or combined in some way?

If **SEPARATE**

- Why do you keep them separate? How do you feel about this? Do you find this easy or difficult to do?

If **LINKED** or **COMBINED**

- Why do you see them linked or combined? In what way and how are they linked or combined? Do you find this easy or difficult?

- Do you view any aspects of your sport and your faith to be particularly compatible?

If **YES**

- Which aspects? Why do you feel these are particularly compatible?

- Do you feel your faith has an influence on your participation in your sport?

  If **YES**

  - How? In what way?

- Do you feel your participation in sport has an influence on your faith?

  If **YES**

  - How? In what way?

- Have you made any changes in your approach to your sport as a result of your faith?

  If **YES**

  - What changes? How did you feel about making these changes?

- Have you made any changes in your approach to your faith as a result of your participation in sport?

  If **YES**

  - What changes? How did you feel about making these changes?

- Does your faith help you with your participation in sport?

  If **YES**

  - How? In what way?

- Does your participation in sport help you with your faith?

  If **YES**

- How? In what way?

- Do you view any aspect of your faith and your sport to be in conflict?

  If **YES**

  - Which? Why do you feel these aspects of your faith and sport are in conflict with each other?

- Does or has your faith ever made involvement in your sport more difficult?

  If **YES**

  - How? In what way? Have you been able to overcome these difficulties?

  If YES

  - How? Are there any difficulties you have not been able to overcome?

  IF **NO**

  - Which? Why not? How do you feel about this?

- Does your participation in sport ever make it more difficult to follow your faith?

  If **YES**

  - How? In what way? Have you been able to overcome these difficulties?

  If **YES**

  - How? Are there any difficulties you have not been able to overcome?

  If **NO**

  - Which? Why not? How do you feel about this?

- How do you feel about the element of competition with respect to your faith?

- Have you ever considered giving up your sport as a result of your Christian beliefs?

  If **YES**

  - Why did you feel this may be necessary? Why did you decide against it?

  If **NO**

  - Would you ever consider giving up your sport if you felt it was necessary to help you progress with your faith? Could you give up your sport if you felt it was necessary to help you progress with your faith?

- Have you ever considered giving up your Christian beliefs as a result of your participation in sport?

  If **YES**

  - Why did you feel this may be necessary? Why did you decide against it?

  If **NO**

  - Would you ever consider giving up your Christian beliefs if you felt it was necessary to help you progress with your sport? Could you give up your Christian beliefs if you felt it was necessary to help you progress in your sport?

- Do you pray about your involvement in sport?

  If **YES**

  - Do you feel this helps you in your sport?

  If **YES**

  - How does it help you? When? What do you pray about?

  If **NO**

  - Why not?

- Are there some aspects of sport that you do not feel it is appropriate to pray about?

  If **YES**

  - Which? Why?

- Do you thank God for your involvement in sport?

  If **YES**

  - What aspect(s) of your sport do you give thanks for?

- Do you view your participation in sport to be a spiritual activity/act of worship/an expression of your spiritual beliefs?

  If **YES**

  - How? In what way?

  If **NO**

  - Why not?

- Do you use sport to witness to others about your faith?

  If **YES**

  - How? In what way? Have you seen any results to your witnessing?

- Do you feel your sporting ability is a gift?

  If **YES**

  - In what way? How do you use this gift? Do you think there is a purpose to your gift?

    If **YES**

    - What do you think this purpose is?

- On the whole would you say your Christian beliefs has made your participation in sport a more positive or negative experience?

- Is there anything you'd like to add?