

Exploring the Role of Spirituality and Spiritual Beliefs in the Pursuit of Excellence and Attainment of Peak Performance in Professional Athletes

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Abstract

Little research has been found which examines the assessment of spirituality in sport performers and its possible role in performance enhancement. The goal of the current study was to understand if and how spirituality impacts athleticism. The subjective experiences of Christian spirituality in an American World Sprinter (male), a British Olympic Sprint Canoe Racer (female), and a retired American Minor League Baseball player (male) were analyzed through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Semi-structured interviews were used to gather data leading to three major themes: “The Belief and Confidence in God”, “Individual and Communal Prayer”, and “The Influential Role of Scripture”. These findings support previous research into athletic excellence and optimal performance. Moreover, this research provides insight into how spirituality can be acknowledged and used in athlete-centered models to enhance performance while providing holistic care for the entirety the athlete: mind, body, and spirit.

Keywords: Spirituality, Peak Performance, Sport Psychology, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), Psychological Skills Training (PST)

Introduction

The quest to improve athletic performance has drawn enormous investment in new technologies and training methods. However, all too often these investments focus on the physical or mental aspect of competition without serious consideration of the spiritual as part of the holistic care of athletes. While some athletes may not find anything spiritual about competition, from either New Age spirituality standpoint or a more traditional spirituality rooted in organized religion, other athletes feel that their spiritual identity is an important part of their overall athletic experience. Therefore, seeking a better understanding of athletes’ self-identity is an important step towards creating the best environment for the whole athlete. For example, Gloria Balague argued that it is critical for those working with elite athletes to examine athletes’ spiritual nature, quoting one unnamed runner who told her, “People see me as a pair of legs and that this is all that I am. I need a coach who will see me as a whole person” (1999, p. 93). Finding out whether spirituality is an important part of that “whole person” is important for those tasked with helping her perform at her best.

Watson and Nesti (2005) provide a thorough review explaining substantive reasons spirituality should be integrated within sport through various ways including the athlete-centered model, mental skills, athletic counseling, and further advancement of research. Such literature like Watson and Nesti’s journal article, and informative work by Balague (1999) sparked a major interest to determine how new information regarding athlete identity, including spirituality, can be obtained and utilized to advance the knowledge base in the field of sport and performance.

This interest extends far beyond the athletic arena. For example, Vayalickarottu (2012) argued that humans are multi-dimensional beings with a predisposition to religion/spirituality

that should be investigated to help people be more fulfilled. He deems humans to be first and foremost religious-spiritual and moral organisms. Because of this, it is believed that spiritual recognition is not simply for the betterment of religious persons involved in sport, but that in order to truly meet the holistic needs of sportspersons, the mind, body and spirit should be considered.

Defining Spirituality

For the purpose of this study, spirituality will best be understood by definitions and interpretations constructed to explain “spiritual well-being” as coined by Paloutzian and Ellison (1982). Reference to spirituality in this study is based upon the definition of spiritual well-being according to the National Interfaith Coalition on Aging (1975): “spiritual well-being is the affirmation of life in relationship with God, self, community and environment that nurtures and celebrates wholeness” (as cited in Ellison, 1983, p. 1). Ellison believed there are two dimensions of spiritual well-being; one dimension refers to a person’s sense of well-being in relation to God, and the second dimension is to have a sense of existential well-being, ultimately for a person to hold meaning and purpose to life, or alternatively a sense of belonging (1983).

Psychology in Relation to Spirituality

What cannot be ignored or forgotten is the origin of the word psychology, which comes from the Greek word “psyche,” meaning soul, mind, or spirit; and “logos,” Greek for knowledge or understanding (Johnson, 1998). However, today this is commonly explained as “psyche” being conjoined with “ology” meaning “study of.” Bearing this in mind, perhaps psychologists should question for what reason has the major focus of psychological studies eliminated the goal of continually gaining insight regarding the soul or spirit. Ellison argued for the importance of the human spirit: “It is the spirit which synthesizes the total personality and provides some energizing direction and order” (1983, p. 332)

Of course, studies such as this one can lead to an evaluation of spirituality that goes deeper than the provided definition for this study, and eventually leading to evaluation of religion and perhaps beyond, but that is the essence of research. The ultimate goal may be to answer one particular question, however along the way a researcher may find it necessary to use additional tools. Likewise, with psychology, one may find it useful to tie in knowledge from other sources such as philosophy and theology, establishing a systematic basis to increase knowledge.

Mindful of the fact that contemporary psychology has veered from the origin of the word and giving little focus to the soul, it can be questioned whether or not one of the deepest aspects of being human has been neglected. Unequivocally, a larger focus has been paid to the mind or social environment of an individual’s life. Though there are many people who do not consider themselves religious or are atheists, according to the 2011 Gallup report 9 in 10 Americans believe in God. In addition, health studies have found quite clearly that many patients deem religion to be highly important, even to the extent of desiring their physicians to discuss religious issues with them, and that many spiritual activities, such as yoga, are being recommended to patients for their overall health (Lee & Newberg, 2005). With such reports, one may wonder why

psychology has succumbed to mostly monistic philosophies, reducing the importance of or even avoiding anything spiritual. Perhaps because some believe spirituality is too heavily associated with organized religion, and should rather be focused on practice, experience and belief (Perry, Robinson, Watson, & Nesit, 2007). Nevertheless, it is a topic worthy of further examination.

Sport Psychology and Spirituality

Sport psychology has made great strides, with the aim of learning how psychological factors affect performance. Though researchers consider numerous factors that can both inhibit or enhance athletic performance specifically in regards to the mind and body, seldom do they consider the matters of the soul or spirit. Even though literature has shown connections between sport, religion and spirituality and research has proven the spiritual element of human beings, the lack in recent literature with this focus to enhance performance is far too great. According to Hochstetler (2009), religious dynamics have been combined with sport throughout human history, dating back to the Mayans and Aztecs. Hochstetler also noted one of the many connections between sport and Christianity in the Bible, as the Apostle Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 4:7, "...I have finished the race, I have kept the faith."

Many athletes are spiritual, though each may vary across the spectrum of spirituality. Ranging from the athlete who is a follower of Christ, to the sportsperson inclined to eastern mysticism or meditational practices, focusing to achieving a conscious awareness or mindfulness. For this reason, theorists Watson and Nesti (2005) made precise steps in research to specifically demonstrate a spiritual dimension in sport and the possible benefits of acknowledging the influence spirituality is capable of having on sport performance. Crust (2006), responded to Watson & Nesti's claim stating it to be a myth, and their promoting of sport and spirituality integration to be premature. However, Watson and Nesti's definitions are general, and can be applied to all athletes whether they consider themselves to be religiously affiliated or not.

Psychological Skills Training and Spirituality

Elite athletes should engage in holistic training that incorporates psychological skills training and spirituality. In one study of Olympians, Gould, Dieffenbach, and Moffett (2002) discovered high levels of the following traits: anxiety, coping and control, confidence, mental toughness, attention, competitiveness, hard work ethic, ability to set and achieve goals, and being coachable. Additional findings were high levels of optimism and dispositional hope, having an "agency" of goal directed determination and a "pathway" of planned ways to meet goals (Gould et al., 2002). This study and many others (see Krane & Williams, 2006) have helped develop models for activities specific to Psychological Skills Training (PST).

Birrer et al. (2009) noted that the significance of PST is growing rapidly from the massive pressure to enhance performance and the challenge to see variation between athletes that either win or lose. Referring to the Olympic motto of "Stronger, Higher, Faster," Smith (2003) argued the bar has been raised and the limits of human performance are being pushed in order to keep with the motto. The inclusion of spirituality in PST has been encouraged as well by Watson and Nesti (2005). They believed this would be especially useful for athletes who consider

themselves spiritual or religious and benefit all by promoting life skills. It is understandable that consultants are expected to meet the individual different needs of each athlete, and therefore religious or spiritual needs may be necessary.

The Absence of Spirituality in Developing Excellence

MacNamara, Button and Collins (2010) believe that in order for an athlete to fulfil his or her potential they must develop a set of particular skills termed “Psychological Characteristics of Developing Excellence” or PCDEs. Miller and Kerr defined performance excellence as being “observable measurable athletic outcomes” while they refer to personal excellence as “the achievement of developmentally appropriate tasks across the length of one’s life and the acquisition of personal qualities that contribute to optimal health and wellbeing” (2006, p. 141). MacNamara et al. learned through their study that each performer’s pathway to excellence is distinct, creating the necessity to implement different approaches at different stages according to the specific needs of the individual athlete (2010). They acknowledge the tactics of learning and employing PCDEs can vary as a result of psycho- behavioral factors, which can change according to an athlete’s situation and personal development (2010).

One way of implementing a holistic approach is through utilization of the athlete-centered model. The precept of the model is clearly stated by Miller and Kerr (2006) based upon Clarke, Smith & Thibault, (1994) which is that sport in itself should actually contribute to the overall development of a sportsperson; physically, psychologically, and socially. A major question springs from the tenet of the model; does the entirety of a person consist of just the three elements, physical, psychological, and social? As stated previously, many studies have shown there to be a spiritual dimension to all of humanity (Vayalilkarottu, 2012; Newberg, D’Aquili, Rause, 2001). Particular to sports coaching, Wilson and Burdette (in press) intentionally incorporate the spiritual into their conception of Holistic, Athlete-Centered Coaching.

The purpose of this study is to answer the question: How do spirituality and spiritual beliefs contribute to the pursuit of excellence and attainment of peak performance? In addition, it is hoped that through the objectives of this study, those who are unaware or lack full understanding regarding the spiritual dimension of humanity- and the role spirituality can have on sport performance- will gain a deeper understanding.

Method

Positionality

Within the confines of this study, the researcher’s innate habit of referring to the deity of Christianity will be evident through capitalization of the first letter of the name as a proper noun (e.g. God, Christ, Jesus, He, Him). For purposes of reducing researcher bias, personally held, strong beliefs are noted. Lastly, though the athletes in this research classify themselves as being of the Christian faith, readers should note the purpose of this study is not proselytization, but instead to promote awareness of a spiritual component to the human mechanism. The resulting

spiritual awareness may encourage all sport affiliated individuals- from coaches to consultants and athletes- to integrate spirituality in their pursuit of excellence in peak performance.

Research Design

This study implements Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which has been described as being strongly committed to discovering the “meaning and sense making” of each individual participant’s so-called world (Smith & Osborn, 2003, p. 54). In addition, it can be said that IPA has a large focus on quality and depth of obtained information, versus quantity in participant numbers.

Participants

Eligibility of the participants was determined by the athlete’s level of sport experience, with all participants either currently or having previously competed on a professional sport level. In addition, they were all required to be over the age of 18 years, even if they were competitors at the professional elite level. This study was conducted with three professional elite athletes; an American World Sprinter (male), a British Olympic Sprint Canoe Racer (female), and a retired American Minor League Baseball player (male). Within the analysis the Sprinter will appear as Respondent 1, the Sprint Canoe Racer as Respondent 2, and lastly the Baseball Player as Respondent 3.

Participant recruitment was decided based upon access and availability to sport performers that were willing to share about their personal spiritual experiences and or beliefs in relation to their sport careers. Participants were referred by personal contacts (n = 2) or recruited through a specific ministry geared towards individuals in sport (n = 1). Each participant was first provided with a concise information sheet explaining the study and offering brief details about the researcher. The information sheet also informed all possible participants of their expectations prior, during, and even after the study. There were, however, no requirements prior to interviews; during interviews they were expected to freely share in conversation, while slightly guided by questions. Also, there were no additional requirements following the interview with the exception of participant validation; each athlete received a copy of the final transcript to their interview. This was to notify the researcher of any misunderstandings, and to ensure proper representation of their shared information. Upon his or her commitment to volunteer, each athlete was asked to review and sign a consent form as written proof they received and read the information sheet, therefore being informed and agreeing to participate, they were also assured that any time, if desired, they were at liberty to withdraw from the study with or without explanation.

The approach to the IPA process design is to gather in-depth exploration of people’s lived experiences, and how they make sense of those experiences. Smith and Osborn described this theoretical process as the following, “The participants are trying to make sense of their world; the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world” (p. 53). Smith and Osborn also contended that IPA is additionally idiographic; instead of major concerns with large populations IPA is committed to learning from individuals and smaller samples in order to discover what experiences in a particular situation are like for certain

humans.

The following results describe the subjective accounts shared by three professional athletes who hold spiritual transcendent views and a close relationship with God. The detailed analysis of the qualitative data will be followed by a thorough discussion of the emerged findings, along with comparison and further analysis of research previously evaluated within the literature review. This paper will conclude with final remarks of study limitations and possible indications for future research in sport and spirituality.

The original plan to have no more than six participants, and the final sample size of three has been supported by Smith and Osborn, who state three participants to be ideal and significantly helpful, specifically for those performing IPA research for the first time (2003, p. 57).

Credibility and Trustworthiness

The personal beliefs of the researcher should be noted as being developed from a Non-Denominational Christian background. Thus, having a commonality with participants sharing the same system of beliefs, certain interpretations were made based upon knowledge of Christianity. All interpretations will however be supported by peer reviewed research. Participants had total liberty to answer questions however they personally desired, free from any perspectives of the researcher, and therefore giving responses without expectation to receive approval or affirmation from the researcher.

Interview Development

The interview schedule was developed with open-ended questions specifically constructed to avoid leading participants into giving any particular response. Prior to interviews the questions were critiqued by peers to ensure appropriateness for participants and without bias based on personal opinions of the researcher. IPA does require the researcher to precisely review transcripts to interpret the data retrieved through participant interviews; it is supportive to take careful measures to refrain from complete subjectivity during the interpreting process. In addition, the entire interview schedule was tested through a pilot study with a retired athlete holding spiritual and faith beliefs.

It should also be acknowledged the usefulness of the researcher possibly having the ability to relate to the participants through her own spiritual beliefs; assuming the capability of truly comprehending what naturally may be a complex explanation to their sense making and the phenomenon of spirituality. It should be safe to acknowledge that in qualitative research it is almost impossible to completely set aside all biases, and with the understanding of IPA it should be clear that it is none other than the job of the researcher to try best at making sense of the participant trying to make sense of their personal and social world (Smith, 2004).

Procedure

A semi-structured interview format was used in order to obtain detailed interpretations of each athlete's subjective thoughts and opinions about spirituality and peak performance. Participants were slightly guided through a discussion with the use of pre-planned, yet flexible, open-ended questions. Questions included were, "What are your spiritual or faith beliefs?" and "Have your

beliefs helped you find meaning and purpose in your sport?” Aside from general active listening comments and the previously planned questions, the researcher refrained from making statements in expectation of the participants providing lengthy and elaborative information. Also at the conclusion of the interviews the athlete was allotted time to ask questions based upon what had been covered in the schedule and/or offer further information they were interested in sharing. Each athlete had a one to one interview conducted via Internet communication tool “Skype.” Two interviews were performed via Skype video and one only by Skype phone call. Each interview time ranged precisely between 45-50 minutes; all information obtained during each discussion session was recorded by a computer-recording program and personalized notes.

Analysis and Process of interpretation

Each recorded interview was transcribed, transcripts were systematically read and familiarized to detect any statements considered highly relevant in describing the athlete’s spiritual beliefs- especially in relation to their pursuit or attainment of peak performance- and a great focus exerted to build a compilation of themes and connections between each athlete’s transcripts.

According to Smith and Osborn (2003) there is no definitive way to conduct an IPA research project; each researcher is at liberty to take on their own format to investigation and interpreting. For this assignment the write up style for the results has been adapted based upon Hinds (2011). Hinds sought to explore the psychological rewards of women spending time in the wilderness. The format Hinds utilized to demonstrate findings are full of insight into each participant’s experience and well organized. In hopes of truly giving a glimpse into the meaning of spiritual beliefs to the athlete participants of this study, the same procedure will be used within the results. Extracts from participant interviews are presented, and the various participant responses will be arranged according to their matched subheading, which will represent recurring themes. Selected extracts are seen as significant expressions of the recurrent themes and also offer deep insight into the phenomenon of the ultimate topic of spirituality in relation to sport. Being that there is no compulsory way to conduct an IPA study, it was seen as beneficial to exhaust the liberty of creating a format that would thoroughly convey research findings, while also providing understanding to readers that may be unfamiliar to the spiritual and religious terminology used by the participants. For this reason, the structure of this paper will not be completely identical to the chosen format of Hinds (2011). Instead of solely presenting major themes with subordinate themes, the analysis will consist of an in-depth introduction explaining the developed results through thematic analysis of each transcript. This will attempt to give a concise overview and will then justify the selection and order of themes that will follow.

Results

The emerged themes derive from spiritual and religious tenets. Theme selection solely derived either from the interview questions and congruency in responses or interpretations of the researcher. Ultimately the process of analysis led to the conclusion that these specific athletes not only strive for excellence through these developed topics, but also any level of peak performance they obtain will most likely have been an outcome of the following three themes. The first can be

deemed as the most significant, either being viewed as the top factor with all other factors being subsidiary, or as it was often referenced by the athletes themselves, a “foundation,” which all other factors stem from or are built upon.

This thought resides in their spiritual beliefs, which generates the first major theme “Belief and Confidence in God.” This theme was found to promote self-confidence and the ability to cope, amongst many other things. The next two themes “Individual and Communal Prayer” and “The Influence of Scripture” will be thoroughly discussed separately. However, it should be noted all subjects were occasionally interpreted as being interrelated, producing some of the same behaviors and cognitions within the athletes. Dialogue on the use of prayer and scripture also led to the interpretation and development of the following topics: “Social Support,” “Team Cohesion,” and “Emotional Intelligence.” The final result that emerged was “Perceptions and Attributions,” stemming from the entirety of each interview. The three major themes will be examined independently from one another, while simultaneously making an attempt to illustrate how they each connect with the supporting topics as sub-themes. Finally, each theme is outlined in the following section, along with supporting excerpts from the participants. The transcription of data used the following two annotations: [...] indicates omitted text: and ... which will indicate any significant pause from the respondent.

Theme 1: Belief and Confidence in God

Belief: Each participant’s belief in God’s existence appeared to be a strong outcome of having an actual relationship with him. Respondent 1: Explains how Christian beliefs were established in his life, stemming from shared teachings from his mother, making up who he is today.

“I am a Christian [...] I think my spiritual beliefs are the foundation of who I am. [...] but there was a point where I adopted the beliefs for myself, so it wasn’t forced upon us. She presented it, brought us up in it, and at a certain point I had my own questions and they were answered for myself, and I made the decision on my own to adopt the beliefs as an adult.”

Respondent 2:

“I believe that Jesus died on the cross and rose again and he paid the price in return for my sins [...] I believe that I’m a follower of Jesus [...] in relation to my sport [...] I feel like if He gave His life to me and I gave my life to him and I’m walking a path in which he’s directing, so where I am in sport or where I am in life, it’s a part of his plan and I want to walk along with him it.”

Respondent 3:

“I follow one faith belief and that is Christianity, non-denominational. My alibi of my life is faith, family and business, or pleasure or sports or whatever it may be at that point in my life. I put God before I put anything and I walk in that light, because I believe wholeheartedly that is the answer and that is where salvation will remain down the road, and I wish all people get the chance to experience that.”

The athletes explain their belief in God in different ways, yet it can be gathered each participant set their faith beliefs and God in high regard. For it to be a foundation, it means

Respondent 1 builds everything else in life upon his spiritual beliefs and faith in God.

Respondent 2 describes her belief in God in relationship form or an exchange for exchange, explaining the act of Christ giving up his life and in return she has given her own free will to live for Him. Simply put, her belief in God and Christ also means she is in sport because it is in fact God's plan for her life.

Respondent 3 describes a hierarchy, which apparently is his motto to life. Statements like walking in light or reference to salvation may be unfamiliar terminology to the non-spiritual and non-Christian person. His word choice leaves room for deeper interpretation. The word light could either simply be an alternative to the phrase "in that respect" or he could be using the word in reference to common Christian jargon, or implying that he views putting God first provides light and guidance in life. This can be further understood by a Christian verse in the Bible that states, "Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path" (Psalm 119:105, NIV). His reference to salvation does not actually appear to be in regards to the salvation in Christ, which may be viewed as the tenet of Christianity, but salvation in this statement may involve his personal idea that all things good are to follow if he continues to have the pecking order of God first in his life. For each participant it is evident their belief goes greatly beyond simply believing in the existence of a deity.

Confidence: Their confidence in God appeared to be a sign of their surety of His ability as a higher power. This confidence was evident in each individual participant's discussion, throughout several topics in the interview. The provided excerpt from Respondent 1 was in reflection to whether or not his spiritual beliefs affect his performance.

Respondent 1: "I don't just step on the track and expect some miracle to hit me, but I like trust God, in the sense of giving me the wisdom to do what I need to do so that I can succeed and be healthy, so that I can be apt [...] to me when I perform best, my mind is clear, I'm focused, I know that my beliefs are there and I know God has my back. But I just let things go [...] God being the one that has granted us the ability to physically be who we are, and to put in that work. It helped, and maybe be a calming presence, a sense that if you believe in a greater power, your kind of let go of things that are out of your control, and you realize there is only so much that you...I mean you have control in the sense that you are the one executing, but you can't control what anyone else does."

Their confidence in God fulfills several roles in their pursuit of excellence and peak performance. Respondent 1 receives confidence in himself to execute what he has trained and prepared for, as he places his trust in God, which results in a calming peace. The other two participants provided inference of having confidence in God for more reasons than one, however it was very evident as they each recalled and discussed challenges in their athletic career. Respondent 2 finds the strength to preserve and not quit, even through challenges that may arise between her and one of the most important individuals in her life as an athlete. She described her coach as having a difficult style of coaching "that broke her confidence." Nonetheless, truly believing that God desires her to be in the sport, she has stayed committed even after considering quitting twice. This mindset is similar to that of famous sportsman Eric Liddell, who espoused

his commitment to sport as a means of honoring God (Austin, 2010). Respondent 2 implies by her staying committed, God helps with her obtainment of achievements and performance.

Respondent 3 also states faith to be his foundation, which assists through the coping process of athletic failure. In addition, his faith or most likely his relationship with God fills the void that can often be present when dealing with personal disappointment. Lastly, they both also attest their confidence in God by trusting He has a plan for their life in sport, but also outside of sport. Respondent 3: In having deep trust in God and in reference to coping with retirement made the following statement:

“I relied on my faith when I realized my career was coming to an end [...] definitely was probably one of the worst days ever [...] but on the other hand, knowing that you’re going to get through it, that God has a bigger plan [...].”

Understanding faith to be a foundation to their life just as each athlete states makes it easier to comprehend just how multifaceted nature of spirituality. The belief in God’s existence and power alone causes the athletes to ascribe various if not all aspects of their sport career to God.

Theme 2: Individual and Communal Prayer

The topic of prayer was initially presented in question form, but it was also a recurring theme frequently mentioned in ways such as “asking God,” “I asked God,” or “say to/tell the Lord.” In addition, each athlete clearly stated prayer to be a critical component for his or her career in sport. While each athlete confirmed the necessity of prayer, they all made individual elaborations regarding the prayers of others or with others who share a commonality in faith. Two factors known as important to individual and team success were revealed to reside in the use of prayer for these particular athletes, being both social support and team cohesion.

Social Support:

Respondent 1 and 2 both give details of the support they’ve received through prayer from others when asked the following, “What role does prayer play in your athletic life?”

Respondent 1: “It’s played a big role. Prayer from a standpoint as my own personal prayers, and the prayers of others that are equally aligned with... What I’m thinking of, or going back to the bible where it says, when two or more people are gathered and praying together there is power. So I would always make sure to touch base with someone like my mother or some other spiritual person in my life...And it’s not a prayer of let me win, it’s a prayer of the work has been put in, give me the platform to perform. It’s really a prayer of thank you. Like for me, when I’m on the line, it’s not ‘help me to do this,’ it’s more ‘thank you for allowing me to get here.’”

Respondent 2: “I’ve got some really wonderful people who are really supportive and pray for me a lot. [...] So, I’ve had a lot of support, my mom is a Christian and my eldest sister is and I know they pray a lot for me and my husband prays so much for me [...] and I think corporate prayer is a massive thing. As for myself I don’t pray enough (laughs). I genuinely spend more time in prayer asking Him for help and guidance now.”

Team Cohesion: Respondent 3: offered a different perspective in the act of group prayer,

making reference to prayer with teammates.

“Every single game I prayed. Some guys that had spiritual beliefs, we prayed together as a team. If someone were to get hurt immediately we’d pray for them for a quick heal or for a response, that they would come through it. It was a daily; even multiple times throughout the game it was an activity that I always did. It played a huge role, 7 years of professional baseball; it played a role every single day.”

There are many factors that can increase the challenges of a team experiencing true togetherness; based upon the above excerpt it is clear the participant and his teammates set to achieve solidarity in a way that can have personal deep and profound meaning. Prayer is an act of communion; an individual praying to God in solitude may find his or her relationship strengthened through experiencing an enhancement in their level of trust in God’s power and faithfulness. It can be assumed that the same can also occur between humans as they come together in prayer of agreement; their relationship is strengthened as they unify their hearts and minds to ask and believe for a particular outcome or even to simply express thankfulness to God. This is congruent with other studies that show prayer to enhance team cohesion (Murray, et al., 2005).

Emotional Intelligence: Various challenges arise in team sport, making it critical for athletes to have the ability to control their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. There is an interesting contrast between respondent 3 and 2 worth noting. Respondent 3 had the advantage of sharing a commonality with teammates; the act of coming together in prayer potentially strengthened their relationship. Respondent 2 in another portion of the interview mentioned not having teammates nor advisors of the same faith and therefore experiencing difficulty in the lack of having others understand her spiritually.

Respondent 2: “Even not getting angry or irritated by other people and being able to ask the Lord to help me with that...and they might be wrong in what they’re doing but there’s no reason why I should be so grumpy and judging of them. I think when you pray for people, it feels easy, what I do is say Lord you deal with this, when you actually pray about the situation more you actually feel like there is this handing over at some point.”

This is an example of her ability to exercise self-control. It can be assumed that prayer can be a way of regulating her emotions for her sake and the sake of those she works closely with. This again demonstrates that a component related to the overall spiritual beliefs of an athlete can actually support or initiate the use of a beneficial skill to sportsmanship; in this case emotional regulation, or self-regulation. This may be a similar response for other spiritual individuals as well, especially Christians.

Theme 3: The Influence of Scripture

It was identified that participants rely heavily on scripture from the Bible; each individual athlete made reference more than once to various scriptures that have been supportive in their career and sport performance. Strong suggestions were made implying scripture reciting to be a major assistance in calming the mind, alleviating stress and anxiety similar to a pre-performance routine.

When asked the question, “Has religious text played a role?” the following statements were made in reference to scripture in the Bible:

Respondent 1: “[...] Psalms 91 I think it is my favorite, one of those passages that helps to relax me. I don’t know it word for word. But it just lets me know...that God has my back. Yeah, scripture has always played a big role in my life and that has carried over into athletics [...] it’s important that your mind is free, and you can’t exert your energy, or you can pay dividends for it during the race. So, that’s just to say those verses are important to help in the relaxation of, when you’ve done all you can do, you can’t control it, let it go, get on the line and let your body do its thing.”

Respondent 2: “[...] Very important I probably have his promises in my head to hold on to. We have really good support in the fact that obviously in competition they’ll have a psychologist and the physiologist and the strength and conditioning coach, and all of them who know you and have been working with you all day and they try to support you. But nothing helps more than knowing God’s word [...] supportive chat does not help me. You know, it’s how do I deal with those situations...and it’s the Lord that I lean on, and His words.”

Through the response given by Respondent 2, it is exceptionally apparent the high level of significance she holds for scripture. This is revealed through her comparisons of “God’s word” to the help of coaches and/or psychologists.

Respondent 3: “It definitely plays a big role...one of them that I loved, just because of the sense of team and unity, was Psalm 133 the unity verse. And obviously I had, ‘behold how good and pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity.’ That was what I did every day, I came together with a unit of teammates to accomplish a goal. So how sweet it was to be able to read that from a scripture and then translate it immediately into my daily activity with my brothers that I played ball with.”

Surprisingly, scripture was placed in high regard compared to mental skills for performance. Respondents 1 and 3 find mental skills to be useful and important but they also believe scripture and other facets to their spirituality such as prayer, to be just as facilitating. Alternatively, Respondent 2 thinks mental skills are helpful but overall places more regard on scriptures because of the encouragement she receives.

Attributions and Perceptions

The examples given by each participant unveil the diversity in which Biblical scripture can have an effect on decisions and behavior. The text in itself seem to either elicit or assist the individual’s skills imperative to their success, such as coping techniques, emotional self-regulation, and group cohesiveness for team sport. In addition, it also appears to have an influence on their perceptions of life and attributions in response to successes and challenges. Respondent 3 recalls highlights from his career, referring to times where he truly encountered a peak experience and reached a level of optimal potential to be divine intervention from God. Stating hitting home runs with a broken wrist to be a result of God intervening. Again making reference to scripture and stating it to be his favorite verse “...With God all things are possible.”

(Matthew 19:26, NIV).

Revealing those three aspects of spirituality alone can have a significant level of influence on their sport performance, it was also learned that peak performance and excellence itself might be subjective, having a variety of meanings to different athletes. The participants each made statements suggesting spiritual athletes may have alternative perceptions, perhaps attributing winning and losing differently in comparison to non-spiritual athletes.

Discussion

It is assumed and concluded based upon emerged findings that participants clearly believe their purpose is in God, making their career in sport a result of the plan He has for their lives. That one belief is set as a foundation that determines the athlete's thought processes and behaviors. As mentioned previously, according to Vayalickarottu (2012) humans have more than psychophysical and social-cultural components, being multi-dimensional including transcendental (i.e. spiritual) as well. He deems humans to be first and foremost religious-spiritual and moral organisms. This was confirmed or found to be true, at least among the three participants of this particular study and clearly depicted through each interview response. It is first the belief in God's existence that results in their persuasion to pray, but likely their confidence in His power that causes them to utilize prayer for numerous situations. The use of scripture weighs heavily in importance, providing personal encouragement that positively enforces healthy behaviors and interpersonal skills.

This study found prayer to be a major factor of influence in the athletes' sport career, classifying it to be the core support of their belief system. These individuals apparently have some level of a tangible experience with God, or else prayer would otherwise have been found as mundane and showing far less significance. The act of prayer for these athletes was beyond quiet meditation, but involved actual communication with God. Prayer was found to be used a variety of different ways, from calming their mind and body from stress and anxiety, to asking for good health, and the ability to perform, to giving thanks to God. Similar results are present in other studies as well (Czech, et al., 2004; Hochstetler, 2009, Bade & Cook, 2008). Also the implications of prayer providing social support, and building team cohesion are congruent findings with a variety of scientific literature, suggesting prayer to provide a sense of "togetherness" (Hochstetler, 2009; Murray, et al., 2005). Social support is said to be both perceived and/or received; each aspect having been found to reduce negative impacts of stress upon performance (Freeman & Rees, 2008).

Though it may not be completely clear exactly how prayer enhances performance, it is evidently "a mysterious part of the faith journey" as suggested by Hochstetler, (2009, p. 327) proving to be a substantial tool for the athletes of this study as well as many others. The additional tool found to be of great impact on the athletes' performance was the use and knowledge of scripture. Their use of scripture did not resemble the form of striving to be theologians, but simply emerged as their personal way of finding meaning in sport and life in general, along with cultivating peace within themselves and harmony with others such as coaches, and/or teammates.

Within the Christian Bible one may find direct stories or metaphors that entail subjects exemplifying the exact psychological characteristics described by Gould and colleagues (2010). The data suggests participants are likely to embody characteristics such as the ability to cope and control anxiety, hard-work ethic, and high levels of dispositional hope (2002). They also revealed their spiritual beliefs along with the assistance of scripture to produce abilities that resemble skills such as overcoming fear and pressure, and self-skills from efficacy, worth, and especially confidence. All of which are learned through PST, mentioned to be necessary for optimal performance in high intensity sport by Birrer and Morgan (2010).

The belief in God, the act of prayer, and the use of scripture, have been found to shape and nurture the mindset needed to develop skills that are believed to assist in achieving excellence and peak performance. Through this study it is presumed that God, prayer, and scripture eventually tends to not only the spiritual, but also physiological, psychological, and social components of the performer.

Conclusion

Limitations

Time constraints were the biggest deficit for this study, which resulted in the inability to acquire a larger sample size. However, it is believed that the ultimate goal to learn how spirituality and spiritual beliefs contribute to the pursuit of excellence and attainment of peak performance was reached; though findings cannot be generalized they can be assumed as transferable. While this study has made attempt to thoroughly provide insight into the world and meaning of spirituality, it is acknowledged that unfortunately only the surface of this complex topic has been assessed.

Future Research

The topic of spirituality and the development of excellence and attainment of peak performance can still greatly benefit from research. Future studies may consider focusing on individuals with alternative spiritual beliefs to Christianity, or a study comparing and contrasting differing spiritual backgrounds. Another IPA study specifically focused on prayer may also provide insight into the mystery of its meaning and affect. Lastly, researchers may consider exploring how a consulting or coaching model can be developed to inform advisors on how to train and assist spiritual athletes to maximum capacity.

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