

## AN OVERVIEW OF THE RECIPROCATING RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SPORT AND RELIGION

JASON W. LEE, PHD, TROY STATE UNIVERSITY

KEYWORDS: RELIGION, CHRISTIANITY, PRAYER

### INTRODUCTION

Religion and sport are two major institutions that compose the social landscapes in the lives of many. Eitzen and Sage (1997) proposed that religious values are inherent in sport ideology. In this sense, “sport embodies religious values including character development, hard work, and perseverance, and, like religion, it promotes and inculcates these qualities and behaviors,” (Bryant and McElroy, 1997, p. 55).

Religion and the role of religion as it pertains to government involvement remain an area of concern throughout the United States. Today, there is great controversy surrounding issues pertaining to the appropriateness of bringing forth components of religion in workplaces, classrooms, and playing fields throughout the country (Alexander & Alexander, 2000). The issue of the legality and appropriateness of issues such as prayer within public school settings and the upholding of a “wall of separation” between religion and public education institutions have been engulfed in a variety of legal battles in our country.

Though there are differing views on the matter of sport and religion’s involvement with each other, it should be apparent that sport and religion do have various common bonds. Putnam (1999) stated, that the association of sport and religion, “can be found in nearly every part of the sports world, from the energized boxing rings of Las Vegas and Atlantic City to the sprawling stock car tracks of the South, from the boisterous stadiums of football to the lush, green fairways of professional golf” (p. 103).

Religious scholar Charles Prebish (1992b) claimed that it is both necessary and expected to look at the newest revolution in sport, the growing relationship of religion and sport. The relationship can be seen through the “use” of sport by religion and the “use” of religion by sport (Coakley, 1998; and Eitzen and Sage, 1992; 1997). Each of these concepts will be addressed in the following passages. Due to the fact that Christianity is the prevailing religious belief system in the United States, the primary emphasis of the related issues covered in this article are focused on Christian sport associations.

### THE USE OF SPORT BY RELIGION

The associations pertaining to the “uses” of sport by religion and the “uses” of religion by sport need to be detailed. Eitzen and Sage (1992; 1997) proposed that religion has utilized sport through churches, religious leaders, church affiliated colleges and universities, and various religious organizations that are centered on sport.

### ORGANIZATIONS USING SPORT

The prevalence of sport’s relationship with religion can be seen in the form of various organizations that have been centered on linking sport and religion. Groups such as Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) and Athletes in Action (AIA) are among the various commonly found organizations (Aitken, 1992; Coakley, 1994; Eitzen & Sage, 1992; 1997; Hoffman, 1992b; Hubbard, 1997; Ladd & Mathisen, 1999).

A rise in the link between evangelical Christianity and sport has occurred over the past few decades. As Aitken (1992) coined the phrase, “Born-Again sport” is quite prevalent in various levels of American

sport, where numerous Born Again athletes can be found in most Christian denominations throughout North America.

The joint union between sport and religions has also taken place through use of sport by quasi-religious institutions. Among such movements have been the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), Catholic Youth Organization (CYO), and Jewish Community Centers (JCC) (Kraus, 1984; Ladd & Mathisen, 1999).

#### **CHURCH-AFFILIATED COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES**

Religion also utilizes sport in educational settings. In North America, numerous church-affiliated higher education institutions made common use of sport. Protestant schools such as Southern Methodist University, Texas Christian University, and Jerry Farwell's Liberty University (just to name a few) have used sport and religion in varying ways and to varying degrees (Coakley, 1994; Eitzen & Sage, 1992; 1997; Hoffman, 1992a; 1992b; Prebish, 1992a).

In addition to the vast array of Protestant colleges that have used sport, there are also numerous widely known church-based Catholic institutions. For example, institutions such as Notre Dame, Georgetown University, Boston College and many others have used sport for various purposes. Other religious based institutions of higher education have also made use of sport, such as the Mormon based institution Brigham Young University (Eitzen & Sage, 1992; 1997; Hoffman, 1992b, Prebish, 1992a).

There are also numerous smaller, less widely known institutions that have utilized sport. Some small church-based colleges are affiliated with the National Christian College Athletic Association (NCCAA) (Coakley, 1994; Hoffman, 1992b; Ladd & Mathisen, 1999; Prebish, 1992a). Headquartered in Marion, Indiana, the NCCAA was established in 1968. Some of the larger NCCAA members have also maintained affiliation with the NAIA, but most have no other affiliation (Ladd & Mathisen, 1999).

#### **CHURCH LEADERS/NOTABLE FIGURES USING SPORT**

Religious leaders and notable figures making use of sport have also become quite common. Among some of the more notable leading historical figures to heavily promote the association of sport with religion was individuals such as Amos Alonzo Stagg and James Naismith (Ladd & Mathisen, 1999).

In contemporary America, the use of sport with religion has been promoted by such notable figures as Jerry Farwell, who has been noted as a sometimes controversial visionary with great interest in politics, sports, education, and media as he joins these segments of life with his fundamentalist Christian messages (Eitzen & Sage, 1997; Ladd & Mathisen, 1999). Another notable religious figure promoting the virtues of sport is Oral Roberts, the founder of Oral Roberts University. When establishing his university, Oral Roberts desired to make sport an integral part of its Christian witness (Eitzen & Sage, 1992; 1997; Ladd & Mathisen, 1999; Overman, 1997).

Additionally, Reverend Billy Graham and Pope John Paul II have been strong proponents of sport and physical activity through encouraging the promotion of sport activities in the lives of their followers (Atcheson, 1994; Coakley, 1998; Kerrigan, 1992; Ladd & Mathisen, 1999, Mathisen, 1990; Prebish, 1992a; Veenker; 1999).

#### **CHURCHES USING SPORT**

In America, the relationship between churches and sport has moved from a position of opposition to that of a position of complete reversal, in which the relationship is readily embraced. By recognizing that our

society is highly sport oriented, many churches and church organizations understand look for ways to meet these interests (Morrow & Morrow, 1986). Churches provide sport opportunities including church leagues and tournaments, as well as various other sport, fitness, and recreation program activities.

Among the varied uses that have been embraced include utilizing sport as a function of social service. Churches sponsoring recreation and sport programs have been provided to members, potential members, and guests, as well as members of the community at large. In line with these purposes of church sport, churches have used sport for functions such as evangelism, fellowship, church growth, and discipleship (Drinkford, 1996; Eitzen & Sage, 1997). Hartzell (1996) noted the involvement of sport activities can serve as a means of catching the interest of many un-churched people that might generally be reluctant to attend church, but may be much more open to sport. Furthermore, in lieu of commercial recreation, churches have provided activities that have served as a positive environment for sport and recreation which can serve as an alternative for less desirable atmospheres (Overman, 1997).

### THE USE OF RELIGION BY SPORT

In addition to the aforementioned uses of sport by religion, there are also numerous ways in which sport makes use of religion. Eitzen and Sage (1997) state that religion can be used to help coaches and athletes deal with stressful situations. For example, utilizing religious practices has been commonly implemented by coaches as a means of supplementing practical athletic techniques.

Prayer activity has been found throughout professional sport, collegiate sport, interscholastic sport, and even youth sport. According to Eitzen and Sage (1997), "Prayer is perhaps the most frequently employed use of religion by coaches and athletes" (p. 163). Examples of issues discussed often requested in prayer may include protection in competition, prayers for good performance, and even prayer for victory.

The uses of prayer have taken place in a variety of contexts as well. Some individuals see prayer as a means for being able to build unity and cohesion. Others may see prayer as being more of a ritual. An example of such can be seen when some individuals recite the Lord's Prayer as a form of team ritual. Another example for prayer use is as a means for dealing with the uncertainties that are part of sport. Furthermore, some have used prayer as a vehicle for bringing forth God's intervention (Eitzen & Sage, 1997).

Along the same lines, Coakley (1998) stated that religion is used in sport as a means to do the following: to cope with uncertainty, to stay out of trouble, to give meaning to sport participation, to put sport into proper perspective, to establish solidarity and cohesion among teams, and to reaffirm the rules and authority of coaches.

### CONCLUSION

The combination of sport and religion proves for various areas of academic and practical interest. This work profiled various aspects pertaining to sport and religion's union, including measures by which sport makes use of religion. Such associations and their implications will continue to leave strong implications on the world of sport.

### REFERENCES

Alexander, F. K., & Alexander, R. H. (2000). From the gridiron to the United States Supreme Court: defining the boundaries of the First Amendment's Establishment Clause. *Journal of Legal Aspects of Sport*, 10(3), 129-137.

- Aitken, B. W. W. (1992). The emergence of Born-again sport. In Prebish, C. (Ed.), *Religion and Sport: The Meeting of Sacred and Profane* (pp. 197-228). Westport, CN: Greenwood Press.
- Atcheson, W. (1994). *Impact for Christ: How the FCA Has Influenced the Sports World*. Grand Island, NE: Cross Training Publishing.
- Bryant, J. E., & McElroy, M. (1997). *Sociological Dynamics of Sport and Exercise*. Englewood, CO: Morton Publishing Company.
- Coakley, J. J. (1998). *Sport in Society: Issues and Controversies*. (5th ed.). St. Louis, MO: Mosby-Year Book.
- Drinkford, F. (1996). Philosophy of sports in the church. In Yessick, T. (Ed.), *Sports Ministry for Churches* (pp. 13-21). Nashville, TN: Convention Press.
- Eitzen, D. S., & Sage, G. H. (1997). *Sociology of North American Sport*. (6th ed.). Boston: McGraw-Hill.
- Eitzen, D. S., & Sage, G. H. (1992). Sport and religion. In Prebish, C. (Ed.), *Religion and Sport: The Meeting of Sacred and Profane* (pp. 79-118). Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Hartzell, D. (1996). Spiritual application of sports. In Yessick, T. (Ed.), *Sports Ministry for Churches* (pp. 7-12). Nashville, TN: Convention Press.
- Hoffman, S. (1992a). Recovering a sense of the sacred in sport. In Hoffman, S. (Ed.). *Sport and Religion* (pp. 153-160). Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics Publishers.
- Hoffman, S. (Ed.). (1992b). *Sport and Religion*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics Publishers.
- Hubbard, S. (1998). *Faith in Sports: Athletes and their Religion on and off the Field*. New York: Doubleday.
- Kerrigan, M. P. (1992). Sports and the Christian life: reflections on Pope John Paul II's Theology of Sports. In Hoffman, S. (Ed.). *Sport and Religion* (pp. 253-260). Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics Publishers.
- Kraus, R. G. (1984). *Recreation and Leisure in Modern Society*. (3rd ed.). Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, and Company.
- Ladd, T., & Mathisen, J. A. (1999). *Muscular Christianity: Evangelical Protestants and the Development of American Sport*. Grand Rapids, MI: BridgePoint Books.
- Morrow, G. & Morrow, S. (1986). *Recreation: Reaching Out, Reaching In, Reaching Up*. Nashville, TN: Convention Press.
- Overman, S. J. (1997). *The Influence of the Protestant Ethic on Sport and Recreation*. Brookfield, VT: Avebury.

Prebish, C. (Ed.). (1992a). *Religion and Sport: The Meeting of Sacred and Profane*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.

Prebish, C. (1992b). Religion and sport: convergence or identity? In Prebish, C. (Ed.) *Religion and Sport: The Meeting of Sacred and Profane* (p. 45-76). Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.

*EDITOR'S NOTE: Further associations between sport and religion will be addressed in two upcoming SMART articles. These articles will focus on the relationship between sport and religion regarding the use of prayer in athletics and church related sport activities.*