

RECOVERING SPIRITUAL CENTERS OF GRAVITY THROUGH SPORT

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Olympic all-round gymnastics gold medalist Gabby Douglas, of the London 2012 Games, proclaimed her relationship with God as a “win-win situation”: “The glory goes to Him, and all the blessings fall down on me.”¹ Ray Lewis, the future Hall of Fame NFL linebacker, paraphrased St. Paul after claiming victory in the 2013 Super Bowl: “When God is for ya, who can be against ya?”² Christians proclaiming spiritual success after victory rings hollow for many, especially injured athletes, brokenhearted coaches, or berated officials.

The sporting observer is left questioning whether religious faith can be integrated with sporting pursuits. Even more challenging, one wonders if involvement in sport enables the spiritual lives of religious believers. Some dispute these possibilities. Writer David Brooks challenges the idea that the sporting world and the religious sphere can co-exist in his 2012 critique of then-New York Knicks rising star and professed Christian, Jeremy Lin.³ Brooks believes the virtues of religion (i.e., self-surrender and openness to redemption) are contradictory to modern sports' embrace of competitiveness and ambition. Others see the apparent contradiction the other way around: there is too large a gap

1. Michael Chapman, “U.S. Gold Medalist Gabby Douglas: ‘I Give All the Glory to God.’” *CNS News* (August 3, 2012). Online: <http://cnsnews.com/news/article/us-gold-medalist-gabby-douglas-i-give-all-glory-god>.

2. Dylan Murphy, “Ray Lewis Postgame Super Bowl Interview.” *SportsGrid* (February 4, 2013). Online: <http://www.sportsgrid.com/nfl/ray-lewis-postgame-super-bowl-interview-video/>.

3. David Brooks, “The Jeremy Lin Problem.” *The New York Times* (February 16, 2012). Online: http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/17/opinion/brooks-the-jeremy-lin-problem.html?_r=0.

between athletics and culture. Particularly for Christian educational institutions, there can be outrage over the gap between the Christian mission of a school and its ethical standards for student athletes and its athletic programs.⁴ Still others, in their critiques of outspoken Christian athletes like Ray Lewis, categorically state that Christians should look at professional athletes less as role models and more as examples of sinners.⁵

Despite these negative critiques of the topic, scholarly examination of the area of sport and religion is taking strides forward. Numerous examples in the English-speaking world of academic research centers, dedicated journals, special sport issues in theological/historical journals, conferences, and edited books reflect the reality of a rising interest in understanding an area that is often not given more than a superficial glance.⁶ In response,

4. Hoffman, "Whatever Happened to Play?"

5. Galli, "Christian Athletes Are Not Role Models."

6. Watson and Parker offer an overview of this activity in a thorough review of the state of sport and Christian scholarship in "Sports and Christianity." Their overview provides several examples of scholarship and research completed in this field. Academic research centers such as The Mirinda Centre for Sport, Spirituality, and Character Development (Neumann University, Philadelphia) and the Centre of Sport, Spirituality and Religion (University of Gloucestershire, UK) have completed surveys on youth in sport and published a number of scholarly pieces. The American Academy of Religion includes a specialist group/section in Religion, Sport, and Play at its annual conference. Two journals, the *International Journal of Religion and Sport* and the *Journal of the Christian Society for Kinesiology and Leisure Studies*, began publication in 2009 and 2010 respectively. Several theologically-related journals offered special issues on the topic of sport: *Concilium* 5, no. 205 (1985); *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* 18 no. 1 (2013) Special Issue—*Spirituality and Physicality: Crossing Thresholds*; *Studies in Christian Ethics* 25, no. 1 (2012) Special Issue—*Christian Ethics and Sport*; *Anvil: An Evangelical Journal for Theology and Mission* 28, no. 1 (2012) Special Issue—*Christianity and Sport*; *Theology* 114, no. 4 (2012) Special Issue—*Sport and Theology*; *Practical Theology* 5, no. 2 (2012) Special Issue—*Sport*; *Interface: A Forum for Theology in the World* 11, no. 1 (2009) Special Issue—*Sport and Spirituality: An Exercise in Everyday Theology*; and *Stadion: International Journal of the History of Sport* 35 (2009) Special Issue—*Sport and Religion*. Several edited books feature articles from conferences on sport and spirituality, most notably, Watson and Parker, *Sports and Christianity* and Parry et al., *Theology, Transcendence, and Ethics in*

authors give direction to a field of thought that appears to be receiving more notice. American theologian Patrick Kelly complains that a narrow focus on a negative, Calvinist view of sport has neglected many of the “theological and spiritual traditions and [of] sport in the West,” especially the more harmonious vision of faith and sport as found in “the medieval and early modern periods in Europe.”⁷ Drawing from historical examples, Kelly presents patristic theology’s rejection of dualistic theology and the embrace by early Jesuit education of physical activity as part of the basis for further research into the theory and practice of spiritualities in sport. His concern for a “more harmonious vision of faith and sport” reverberates with other scholars who believe that churches are overlooking a vital element of culture—sport. German ethicist Stephan Goertz weighs the implications of sport as “a sign of the times.”⁸ He worries that Christians might be seduced into neglecting the concrete “social and cultural contexts, in which sport is practiced today.”⁹ As Western society becomes more “bodily-motivated,” sport inhabits “certain experiential spaces [that] are no longer in the realm” of churches.¹⁰ In other words, churches are asked to find a place where those involved in sport are “allowed and able to interpret their practice in the context of the Christian faith.”¹¹ United Kingdom scholars Nick Watson and Andrew Parker broaden this perspective. They argue that greater attention needs to be paid to experiences of players, coaches, and officials and how they reconcile religious beliefs and practices with the modern sporting culture.¹² Based upon the sporting practices of

Sport. Finally, the Vatican began a “Church and Sport Office” as part of the Pontifical Council for the Laity (2004) for highlighting the recreational, educational, and pastoral dimensions of sport.

7. Kelly, *Catholic Perspectives on Sports*, 1.
8. Goertz, “Sport as a Sign of the Times,” 190.
9. *Ibid.*, 192.
10. *Ibid.*, 204–5.
11. *Ibid.*, 205.
12. Watson and Parker, “Sports and Christianity,” 41.

these parties, can churches better grasp the role of sport as a current “sign of the times”?

Educator and kinesiologist Shirl Hoffman, in his historical survey of sport and faith in the United States and beyond, criticizes evangelical Christians for their unreflective embrace of modern sport yet sees possibilities for spiritual growth through sporting activities. He argues that Christians need to approach sports not as immediate, feel-good experiences that threaten human flourishing in the long term, “but as times and places for recovering our spiritual centers of gravity and for rehearsing spiritual truths.”¹³ By engaging the sporting realm as an important element of culture, Christians open themselves to the possibility of personal growth and deeper reflection in their lives of faith. In “recovering our spiritual centers of gravity and for rehearsing spiritual truths” through sporting activity, Christians seek to embrace all that is good in sport and the life-giving moments for persons and communities found therein.

But where does one start? It is necessary to examine first the significance of sport in society and the experiences of persons involved in sport. Inquiry into the level of experience, as the beginning of a mediating theology,¹⁴ attempts to uncover and apprehend the information or circumstances of people in sport. A better grasp of the positive or negative experiences people have in sport as related to basic spiritual experiences opens the door for further theological reflection into this rising, though often disregarded, area of study.

This paper establishes a means by which sporting experiences as spiritual experiences can be appropriately contemplated. In this way, sporting experiences can be better appreciated, in Hoffman’s words, “as times and places for recovering our spiritual centers of gravity and for rehearsing spiritual truths.”¹⁵ The goal is to establish a framework for uncovering the multitude of possible spiritual experiences in sport. The paper is divided into three parts: The Significance of Sport in Society; A

13. Hoffman, *Good Game*, 292.

14. Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 135.

15. Hoffman, *Good Game*, 292.

Spirituality for Sporting Experiences; and Recovering Spiritual Centers through Sport. The first part provides a brief overview of the significance of sport in North America based upon two high profile reports developed in the USA and Canada. Naming the importance that North American's place on sport leads to highlighting the different ways people engage in sporting pursuits. Given the many forms of participation in sport, the second part presents a modest, yet suitable, spirituality. An overview of the increasing prominence of spirituality in research about young people provides a vantage for deeper consideration of sporting experiences. A relational spirituality that reflects upon one's relationship to self, others, the physical world, and God enlivens sport to become a place where spiritual truths are rehearsed and embraced. The combination of the many ways of participation in sport (Part 1) and a relational spirituality (Part 2) constitute a framework for understanding possible spiritual experiences in sport. In Part 3, the value of the framework is advanced by examples of spiritual experiences within sport. These instances reveal the significance of sport as a possible means to bring balance and spiritual growth to the lives of participants—at whatever level.

The Significance of Sport in Society

Beyond sporting championship events like the World Series or Wimbledon, top athletes in sport often attract negative attention for unethical actions inside and/or outside the sporting arena. In the spring of 2013 alone, controversies garnered headlines on the global stage and beyond the sports pages of newspapers: Lance Armstrong's public confession of cheating throughout his seven Tour de France cycling championships, a murder investigation of Olympian Oscar Pistorious, and the Australian Crime Commission's investigation into drug use and criminal activity in the country's sports are a few examples. The controversies speak poorly of elite, competitive sport. Despite this trend, the public's outcry over such detestable actions highlights the significance of

sport in society and the desire for the reshaping of modern sport—an endeavor in which Christian thought can assist.

Two North American agencies have been at the forefront of shaping a public vision of contemporary sport at the community, national, and international levels. The United States Anti-Doping Agency (USADA) began in 2000 as an independent body to “preserve the integrity of competition” for US athletes participating in the Olympics and Paralympics and “inspire true sport” principles—like fair play and respect—through education and continuing research.¹⁶ The Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport (CCES) provides a similar role as a not-for-profit agency that seeks to protect the integrity of sport by activating a “values-based and principle-driven sport system.”¹⁷ Both agencies heavily support a common ideal called “True Sport.” Originating in Canada as a member-driven social movement, True Sport—a name later adopted by USADA—is a program that promotes safer, fairer, and more inclusive sport at the grassroots level in North America.¹⁸ Collaboration between the two national agencies resulted in similar published reports that highlight the importance of sport in each country. USADA’s *True Sport: What We Stand to Lose in Our Obsession to Win* and the Canadian equivalent, *What Sport Can Do: The True Sport Report*, draw upon supporting empirical data in order to emphasize the role of sport in the enhancement of community life, the promotion of health and well-being, the mentorship of young people, and the increasing economic importance of sport. The prominence of sport and its capacity to shape positive developments in society, as outlined in the documents, are signs for church leaders to consider how they can encourage Christians to engage sporting activities in a way that supports their spiritual life.

A brief outline of the importance of sport, as found in these two North American reports, serves as a cautionary notice for Christian leaders who may underestimate sport’s weightiness in society. For organizing purposes, the major findings are listed

16. USADA, “About.”

17. CCES, “Mission.”

18. Karri Dawson, email message to the author, July 18, 2013.

according to different ways of engaging sport so as to reflect the realities of sport.

Player. Playing a sport has individual and social benefits. The Canadian report highlights how active engagement in sport, among other things, reduces mortality rates, childhood obesity, chronic disease (like cardiovascular diseases), and depression, along with assisting with managing anxiety and stress.¹⁹ Beyond these positives, sporting activities can foster self-esteem, facilitate social inclusion and integration, challenge gender norms, and provide opportunities for leadership and achievement for both sexes.²⁰ At a community level, sport has the capacity to build social capital, including building more inclusive communities for immigrants and disabled persons.²¹ The Canadian report concludes that sport is “perhaps the most effective system we have, outside of the family, for providing young people with positive adult role models and mentors and opportunities for positive development.”²² Thus, as mirrored also throughout the USADA report, sport at its best can enable and enrich the lives of participants.²³

Throughout North America, sport engages millions of people. According to the USADA report, “more than three-fifths of U.S. adults—approximately 162 million people—claim some relationship to sport-related activities.”²⁴ The 2000 US Census, the report claims, estimates that more than 50 million youth are involved in organized sport.²⁵ In Canada, the *True Sport Report* states that “one out of every 4 adults and one out of two children actively participate in sport.”²⁶ Connections with sport, it must be remembered, go beyond playing.

19. Mulholland, *What Sport Can Do*, 14–17.

20. *Ibid.*, 25.

21. *Ibid.*, 43–44.

22. *Ibid.*, 61.

23. USADA, *True Sport*, 36.

24. *Ibid.*, 19.

25. *Ibid.*

26. Mulholland, *What Sport Can Do*, iii.

Coach. Coaches are a leading positive influence on youth, according to the USADA report, which adds that “at their best, coaches can help their players improve their skills, perform to their best ability, develop strong character, and gain confidence.”²⁷ While there is the potential for coaches to cause psychological and emotional harm, the USADA report summarizes many surveys that “point to coaches as a major positive influence.”²⁸ Coaches can “foster healthy lifestyle habits, discourage the excesses of the ‘jock culture,’ teach leadership skills, work with parents to create a healthy sport environment, and steer children away from negative behaviors.”²⁹ Overall, the USADA report concludes that coaches can optimize the potential of an individual and the team by creating a supportive environment.³⁰

In 2005, the number of amateur coaches in Canada reached 1.8 million (or 7 percent of Canadians), according to the Canadian report.³¹ This number of coaches is remarkable, although it is only part of a more impressive statistic: the highest group of volunteers is found in sport and recreation organizations—this amounts to 28 percent of all Canadian volunteers.³² The USADA report, in a less specific manner, states that 25 percent of American adults “are *actively engaged* in sport as participants, parents of children in sport, coaches, or volunteers.”³³ The number of volunteers in sport includes officials, who are worthy of inclusion here.

Official. An overarching theme of both reports is the desire to focus on fair play and enjoyment in sport in contrast to a focus on winning at all costs. Players, this implies, should consider respecting officials or referees as overseers of fair play. Given the intentions of the reports, it is understandable that they give relatively little treatment to the role of officials. The USADA

27. USADA, *True Sport*, 55.

28. *Ibid.*

29. *Ibid.*, 58.

30. *Ibid.*

31. Mulholland, *What Sport Can Do*, 9.

32. *Ibid.*, 10.

33. USADA, *True Sport*, 19.

highlights the many youth surveyed who report parents yelling at officials; the Canadian report adds that one in three youth players surveyed agreed that parents should not “yell at the referee.”³⁴ The two findings imply a need for increased respect for officials as authority figures. The lack of supporting data on the role of the official becomes more evident as the Canadian report states that in 2005 “3 percent (800,000) of adult Canadians were involved in sports as referees, officials or umpires.”³⁵ Despite the underemphasized role of officials, much more is stated about parents’ influence.

Parent. The parental role in youth sport is of great importance. The USADA report stipulates that parental encouragement of a child’s sport involvement correlates to the child’s attraction to, enjoyment of, and competence in the sport.³⁶ Parental support also increases the likelihood of the child displaying concern for opponents and grace in losing.³⁷ Parental involvement in sport can benefit parents themselves—the joy of watching their child develop new skills or the chance to interact with other parents.³⁸ The Canadian report also looks at parental support in terms of involvement in sport. It notes that parent involvement nearly doubles the participation rate in sport among children 5 to 14.³⁹ This support can include a reported 2.18 percent of total household spending on sport, which translates into \$1963 per Canadian household.⁴⁰ Given the economic merit attributed to sport by households, it is little wonder that “sport is ranked second only to families themselves as a highly positive influence in shaping the values development of young Canadians.”⁴¹

34. Mulholland, *What Sport Can Do*, 62.

35. *Ibid.*, 9.

36. USADA, *True Sport*, 59.

37. *Ibid.*, 61.

38. *Ibid.*, 60.

39. Mulholland, *What Sport Can Do*, 8.

40. *Ibid.*, 49–50.

41. *Ibid.*, 11.

Spectator. Slightly more than one third of American adults see themselves as spectators of sport, according to the USADA report.⁴² Further, the report notes several studies that link positive (or negative) spectator behaviors to positive (or negative) player behaviors.⁴³ Fans influence sporting activities and, in their own way, are participants in the events they view. They enter into the event and cheer for their team or athlete; they are a significant part of a cultural activity known as the sports industry.

Spectators play a major part in the business side of sport. In economic terms, Humphreys and Ruseski estimate (in the face of several uncertain factors) the value of the US sports industry (based upon participation, attending spectator events, and following sports through the media) as between \$44 to \$73 billion dollars.⁴⁴ In Canada, it is thought that sport contributes 1.2 percent of the national GDP, up 0.3 percent since 1996.⁴⁵ Growth in spectator interest in sport drives up the value of sporting agreements between leagues and cable television, giving sport greater influence on societal norms.

A few conclusions can be drawn from the above paragraphs. Sport plays a significant role in North American society. Whether it is for health or social benefits, participants in sport can gain much from their involvement. Society becomes more connected, receives economic growth, and realizes higher rates of volunteerism. At the same time, both reports imply throughout the need to improve or reform sport. In fact, only 20 percent of Canadians surveyed thought that “sport is living up to its full potential as a positive force in the lives of young people.”⁴⁶ Likewise, over half of Americans surveyed believed that sport needs to move away from a winning at all costs approach to one that supports “honesty, fair play, respect for others, teamwork, and self-discipline.”⁴⁷ Sport, then, requires careful reflection and

42. USADA, *True Sport*, 19.

43. *Ibid.*, 61–62.

44. Humphreys and Ruseski, *Size and Scope of the Sports Industry*.

45. Mulholland, *What Sport Can Do*, 49–50.

46. *Ibid.*, 78.

47. USADA, *True Sport*, 103.

engagement by theologians, spiritual writers, and religious educators in terms of its capacity to act as an outlet for self-discovery, ethical living, and spiritual nourishment for the different levels of engagement.

The influence of sport reaches much further than the athletes that play. The above reports specify other important roles (like coach and parent) that can be seen as ways of participating in sport. Moreover, there are other levels of engagement that could also be considered as a means by which one participates in sport: e.g., *caretaker* (someone who tends to the field, court, pool, etc.), *sporting event promoter* (someone who draws the community or city together for an event), *administrator* (someone who organizes meetings, playing schedules, association's budgets, etc.), *equipment manufacturer/supplier* (someone or a business who/that supplies shoes, racquets, etc.), and a *teacher* (someone who teaches skills like a proper golf swing, a mental approach to a game, etc.). The many levels of engagement in sport underline the complexities of analyzing sport for its potential to enable contemplation of life's spiritual truths. In other words, reflecting upon the actions of the athlete is incomplete. A more robust examination of sport would reflect more appropriately the many participants in sport. Having outlined the significance of sport and these levels of engagement through the above reports, it is important to turn to an understanding of spirituality that can enable the recovery of spiritual centers of gravity through sport participation in any possible manner.

A Spirituality for Sporting Experiences

Professor of Human Kinetics, Paul Heintzman, notes that studies in leisure and spirituality frequently focus narrowly on the "interiority" of an individual, disregarding the person's relationship to others and a transcendent, Ultimate Reality.⁴⁸ He highlights examples of outdoor pursuits as central to this type of narrow investigation. In response, Heintzman advocates for a

48. Heintzman, "Leisure Studies and Spirituality," 23.

spirituality for sport that not only considers the interior life of individuals, but also takes into account a broader horizon of relationships with their chosen activity. To elaborate upon and determine what this kind of relational spirituality could look like for sporting enthusiasts, the work of educators promoting spirituality as a holistic approach to support young people's growth and development is of great value.

Educator Brendan Hyde points out that the spirituality of young persons has garnered much attention recently in Western culture.⁴⁹ He points to “educational concerns”—like “building resilience against depression, drug and alcohol abuse, and youth suicide”—that demand consideration for “the development of the whole child.”⁵⁰ These concerns reflect the interests of the aforementioned reports. Like those who assert the impact of sport as something more significant than physical improvements alone, an educational approach to spirituality strives to respond to the many needs of persons to achieve their highest learning potential. Hyde notes how others may label these concerns under titles of *well-being*, *values education*, and *development*, yet share a common affirmation of the need to address concerns of young people holistically.⁵¹

This common concern has led educators to define spirituality in a way that optimizes growth and development of young people. According to educator Marian de Souza, spirituality is “no longer confined to the fields of theology and religion.”⁵² Although these fields can give great depth to spirituality, the inclusion of insights from disciplines like psychology, sociology, neuroscience, and biology means that Christians must consider how everyday experiences—like sporting ones—lead to spiritual growth and stronger ties to others. In this educational approach, common elements between these fields of thought overlap and reveal, in the words of de Souza, spirituality as “primordial” and

49. Hyde, *Children and Spirituality*, 9.

50. Ibid.

51. Ibid.

52. De Souza, “Rediscovering the Spiritual Dimension in Education,” 1130.

“an essential human trait that is relational.”⁵³ Expressions of spirituality from the everyday world are based upon a larger horizon of “levels of connectedness that the human person has to Self and Other in the physical world, and to a Transcendent Other.”⁵⁴ The web of relations as described by de Souza represents a shift away from a limited, interior-focused soul to an understanding of spirituality as a means to helping young people “find meaning and a sense of belonging.”⁵⁵ Describing spirituality as foundational to who we are, how we make meaning in life, and how we approach the future makes it relevant, practical, and more possible to engage sporting activities in spirituality. Spirituality, as the very core of the human being, does not isolate the self from others but sets in motion a broad horizon for the self’s growth and development.

This relational understanding of spirituality is more fully explored in the research of Hay and Nye. They speak of spirituality as a *relational consciousness*.⁵⁶ Based upon their interviews with children, Hay and Nye determined that at a basic level spirituality is the awareness of being connected to a larger reality.⁵⁷ In short, it is the recognition that there is *more* outside of oneself. It is a rich, conscious recognition of one’s relationship to the outer world. More than simply awareness, relational consciousness suggests a reflective consciousness of “meta-cognition” where a child reveals an “unusual level of . . . perceptiveness” and his or her own acknowledgement of “the remarkable nature of his or her own mental activity in certain contexts.”⁵⁸ Hay and Nye explain what they found in their interviews: “It was often this apparently objective insight into their subjective response that fostered a new dimension of understanding, meaning and experience (of meta-consciousness)

53. Ibid.

54. Ibid.

55. Ibid.

56. Hay and Nye, *The Spirit of the Child*, 108.

57. Ibid., 108–9.

58. Ibid., 109.

in itself.”⁵⁹ That is to say, when one had an objective sense that one is a subject within a multitude of connections between different subjects, the world is perceived in relational terms. By moving beyond simple relational terms like friends and foes, one defines relationships to self, others, world, and God in such a way that value is added to ordinary perspectives. Hay and Nye conclude that the relational consciousness provides the basic context for spirituality and thus, through this frame of reference “can arise meaningful aesthetic experience, religious experience, personal and traditional responses to mystery and being, and mystical and moral insight.”⁶⁰ This can include possibilities in the realm of sport.

The fourfold categorization of one’s relationships—to self, others, the physical world, and God—is described by Hay and Nye as *contexts* in spirituality.⁶¹ These contexts act like different landscapes or four spiritual dimensions that can be considered in sporting pursuits. Hay and Nye briefly outline each to distinguish between these different spiritual terrains. To begin, their interviews found people’s conscious awareness of their relationship to God as the most straightforward context to define. It was tied to traditional notions of spirituality, where people explained their religious experiences or pondered their uncertainty about God’s existence.⁶² Second, the spiritual context of one’s relationship to others often built a bridge to and from one’s relationship to God.⁶³ In giving to and receiving things from another person or teammate, for instance, an individual catches a glimpse of the spiritual life. Third, one’s relationship to the physical world includes profound responses to the sensual beauty in nature and the mystery of its make-up.⁶⁴ It may be that nature acts as a conduit for an experience of God; it could be that marveling about something in creation—such as a bobbing knuckleball—results in a moment of amazement. Finally, the context of one’s

59. Ibid.

60. Ibid.

61. Ibid., 115.

62. Ibid., 115–16.

63. Ibid., 116.

64. Ibid., 116–17.

relationship to self is made available in people's "sense of relationship with their own identity and their own mental life."⁶⁵ Persons may discover a deep truth about themselves or recognize the delight they experience in an activity, like when playing their favorite sport. Together, these four contexts act as a means of categorizing the properties of spirituality described as "relational consciousness" and act as a baseline of potential spiritual experiences in sport.

Hay and Nye's four contexts of spirituality share commonalities with similar depictions in Christianity and sport. The Gospel of Matthew (22:34–40) reports Jesus' greatest commandment as (a) to love God and (b) to love one's neighbor as (c) one loves oneself. NFL standout running back Gale Sayers authored an autobiographical book titled according to the last phrase of his popular motto: "The Lord is first, my friends are second, and I am third."⁶⁶ Educator Norman Richardson called upon churches to encourage physical play early in the twentieth century as reflected in the Boy Scouts of America's motto (a) to complete one's duty to God, (b) to help others at all times, and (c) to stay physically strong, mentally awake and morally straight.⁶⁷ Notably, these follow only a threefold categorization and overlook Hay and Nye's inclusion of one's relationship to the physical world. Given a more physically-aware theological view⁶⁸ and the consideration in sport and recreation scholarship of environment and place,⁶⁹ it is essential that spiritual experiences in sport consider the physical world. Needless to say, when it comes to the corporeal expressions within sport, the contact among bodies, physical play-objects, and places of play require theological reflection if deeper thinking is to incorporate the entire sporting experience.

65. Ibid., 117.

66. Sayers, *I Am Third*.

67. Richardson, *The Church at Play*, 131.

68. See Santmire, *The Travail of Nature*; Clifford, "Creation"; Christiansen and Grazer, "And God Saw That It Was Good."

69. See Hall and Page, *Geography of Tourism and Recreation*; Hochstetler, "Running in Place"; Hayes and Karamichas, *Olympic Games*.

Through this fourfold categorization of self, others, the physical world, and God, there is the possibility of greater reflection upon people's sporting experiences as spiritual. While this depiction offers a basic vision of spirituality without the assistance of theological and historical insight, it is an important first step in understanding the experiences within sport. In doing so, one follows the insight from Goertz above that churches are compelled to consider meaningful, spiritual experiences in sport that exist outside of the influence of organized religion. Theological reflection demands an adequate grasp of the experience of sporting enthusiasts.

Table 1 below presents what has been determined thus far. In the first part of the paper, several levels of engagement in sport have been highlighted through a summary of the significance of sport in society. The complexity of sport participation reinforces the need for theological reflection. This first part becomes the horizontal or x-axis on the chart. (Included is the role of "caretaker" for the purpose of examining a level of engagement overlooked by the two reports.) In the second part, the four contexts of spirituality become the basis for a relational spirituality of sport. Beyond a spirituality that focuses solely on the individual and his/her interior experiences, a fourfold relational spirituality underlines a four-dimensional experience. In fact, the four levels are not mutually exclusive. These four contexts compose the vertical or y-axis of the chart. When the framework is viewed as a whole, there emerge many potential levels for spiritual engagement in sport. The final part of the paper will describe further each of the four contexts of spirituality using examples from contemporary sport.

Table 1. Levels of Engagement in Sport for Recovering Spiritual Centers of Gravity

	Player	Coach	Official	Parent	Spectator	Caretaker
Self						
Other						
Physical World						
God						

Recovering Spiritual Centers of Gravity through Sport

Recovering spiritual centers of gravity through sport necessitates deeper reflection upon actual sporting experiences. It calls for thinking about what happens in sport within each of the four contexts of spirituality. Although the above section distinguished between these dimensions, further delineation of the four contexts makes reflection by participants in sport a reality. Additional educational insights into spirituality can help specify possibilities within the four dimensions.

As educators engage interdisciplinary thinking around spirituality, there have been attempts to articulate what exactly spirituality looks like and how it can be observed by educators. Spiritual intelligence (SI), highlighted by De Souza is such an attempt. It is a way for educators to grasp how learners make deeper meaning of their lives in the context of their many relations with others.⁷⁰ Adams, Hyde, and Woolley provide a basic definition of SI—“a person’s ability to draw upon the spiritual as a means by which to address and solve problems of meaning in life”—and highlight the term’s usage among some psychologists, health professionals, and educators.⁷¹ Building upon Gardner’s multiple intelligences,⁷² spiritual intelligence is

70. De Souza, “Rediscovering the Spiritual Dimension in Education,” 1130.

71. Adams, *Spiritual Dimension of Childhood*, 89.

72. Gardner, *Multiple Intelligences*.

another level of intelligence that highlights how people have varying degrees of abilities to make meaning in the face of life's challenges. Psychologist Robert Emmons explains spiritual intelligence as "a set of specific abilities or capacities" or "problem solving and goal attainment in concrete life situations."⁷³ It is a pragmatic approach to spirituality that does not encompass all depth dimensions of spirituality,⁷⁴ yet it depicts specific qualities and abilities that are generally found in persons who deal relatively well with problems of meaning in life. While Adams, Hyde, and Woolley outline complementary formats that articulate spiritual intelligence,⁷⁵ most significant here is a focus upon the positive abilities outlined by these authors that enable people to address challenges in life. Thus, it is pragmatic to draw upon the similar descriptions of SI and consider how these spiritual capacities might be practiced within sport. These abilities can be categorized according to the four spiritual contexts outlined above. The result is a specific set of positive abilities that sporting experiences can foster for spiritual growth and development of athletes.

Below is a description of each spiritual context according to the positive abilities described in spiritual intelligence. Each explanation contains a sporting example. These instances show how at any level of sporting engagement there are multiple possibilities for supporting spiritual progress. (Since there are only four spiritual contexts, the instances of sporting engagement are contained to the same number.)

One's Relationship to Self

In this spiritual context, sporting experiences can act as a rehearsal for how people understand their identity and their mental image of themselves. In sport, there is ample opportunity to grow in self-knowledge, along with the possibility of attaining a higher level of consciousness (e.g., an experience of flow—

73. Emmons, *Psychology of Ultimate Concern*, 162–63.

74. *Ibid.*, 163.

75. Adams, *Spiritual Dimension of Childhood*, 89–92.

concentration, effortlessness, etc.)⁷⁶ Reflecting upon experiences of delight and despair, or analyzing responses to pain and suffering, opens doors of self-revelation for athletes, spectators, and others. Moments of forgiveness and acceptance in sporting circumstances are common too. Even how one handles victory or defeat—which often reflects the inherent value of sport to those involved—can play a significant role in considering the basis for participants’ self-identity and well-being.

Level of Engagement example: Parent. In *Parenting an Athlete*, parent and coach Annette Reiter asks parents to reflect upon their engagement in their children’s athletic pursuits.⁷⁷ She expresses her frustrations as a coach dealing with parents; she describes her exasperation as a parent dealing with her children’s coaches. Included are accounts of parental negativity thrust toward coaches, referees, and student athletes.⁷⁸ Parents’ desire to give “the best” to their children, argues Reiter, too often morphs into over-involvement that stifles children’s self-esteem and sense of responsibility.⁷⁹ The spiritual context of one’s relationship to oneself is engaged in Reiter’s challenge to parents: Do parents consider the larger consequences of sending their children to the best sports camps, buying them the best equipment, and securing them personal trainers? Beyond dollars and cents, she argues that parents generally miss a larger picture: sport teaches life lessons.⁸⁰ Parents need to allow their children to encounter life’s unfairness and turn adversity into meaningful experiences.⁸¹ In parents’ reflections on their engagement in sport, they can come to accept suffering in their children’s lives as an authentic internal challenge leading to spiritual growth.

76. Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow*.

77. Reiter, *Parenting an Athlete*.

78. *Ibid.*, 32.

79. *Ibid.*, 15–18.

80. *Ibid.*, 92–93.

81. *Ibid.*, 17.

One's Relationship with Others

The second spiritual context moves the sporting participant to the level of examining the community formed in sporting activities. Reflecting upon experiences of community within sport asks participants to think about how they act toward others (i.e., opponents, spectators, parents, teammates, officials, and caretakers), to reflect upon whether they avoid unnecessary harm of others, and to contemplate how much they desire to bring out the best in others. Furthermore, participants may want to reflect upon other key moments in sporting activities—whether positive (e.g., moments of synchronicity) or negative (e.g., moments that present cheating as advantageous). All told, the points of discussion can enable a deeper respect for others and engage a relational spirituality.

Level of Engagement: Spectator. Philosopher Michael Novak notes that the most appropriate mode of observation for sporting events is *to participate*: “that is to extend one’s own identification to one side, and to absorb with it the blows of fortune, to join with the team in testing the favors of the Fates.”⁸² The imagination enables spectators to identify with an athletic group that may bring favor or risk one’s security. For example, through the LiveStrong Foundation, many fans of cyclist Lance Armstrong were inspired to live cancer-free and exceed the expectations of skeptics. When Armstrong severed formal ties with the organization in 2012 over undeniable evidence of his systematic cheating,⁸³ many people pondered whether they should still wear their LiveStrong bracelets as a sign of Armstrong’s determination and competitive nature.⁸⁴ Devotees to Armstrong, in the

82. Novak, *Joy of Sports*, 144.

83. Glenn Kessler, “Is Lance Armstrong the World’s Biggest Liar?” *Washington Post* (January 18, 2013). Online: http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker/post/is-lance-armstrong-the-worlds-biggest-liar/2013/01/17/2d8ff7c-60fa-11e2-9940-6fc488f3fecd_blog.html?hpid=z3.

84. Burt Solomon, “Why I’m Still Wearing My Livestrong Bracelet,” *The Atlantic* (January 18, 2013). Online: <http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/01/why-im-still-wearing-my-livestrong-bracelet/267337/>; Bella English, “For Some, Doping Case Hurts Livestrong Image,”

context of a relational spirituality, may often note the synchronicity of their cancer battle with Armstrong's own, but can they support a man who rampantly cheated in his sport? Identifying with him becomes an issue involving how one relates to Armstrong's cycling opponents, the sport in general—including active cyclists in the local community—and cancer survivors who also may be unsure about supporting him. The messiness of the situation reveals how linked spectators become to the players of a game, requiring further contemplation of their spiritual needs in complicated situations.

One's Relationship to the Physical World

As shown above, the participants' encounter with the physical world underlines the reality of human bodiliness and its engagement with sporting objects and places. In this context, people consider moments of experiencing *oneness* within their sport, those times of seeing beauty or feeling harmony with sport, and their ability to make decisions by listening to their bodies (e.g., injuries or felt intuitions). Such a reflection can include focusing on how one treats the field/objects of play in sport, even to the extent of sanctifying these (i.e., sacramentality). Consideration of this context can overall assist with considering one's relationship to the Earth and all of nature.

Level of Engagement: Caretaker. Sport requires someone to ensure the safe and proper use of the objects and the field of play. A caretaker finds satisfaction in witnessing a fair field of play that might inspire participants through its beauty—like a well-groomed golf course or a carefully tended ice hockey rink.⁸⁵ As an example, I recall preparing a backyard rink for a day of playing hockey with friends during my childhood. The night before, I labored to shovel snow off the rink and then took

Boston Globe (November 13, 2012). Online: <http://www.bostonglobe.com/lifestyle/style/2012/11/13/what-with-those-livestrongbracelets/YbNPPFYAaL4heUNMyQtak/story.html>.

85. See Gretzky, *Gretzky*, 16; Falla, "Building a Rink of Your Own."

the extraordinary step of sweeping the fine dust of snow that was too close to the ice for the shovel to remove. There was something captivating in creating a perfect sheet of ice. Sprinkling water on the ice created steam, resulting in a haze that lent a sense of mystery to the process. When I was done, I stood quietly and admired how the back yard looked as if it was touched by heaven. I imagined lacing up my skates and taking long strides over the surface—hearing the crisp cut of the metal blades against the frozen expanse. The sense of wonder came about from a felt *oneness* with the surroundings and witnessing their sublime beauty.

One's Relationship to God

In the final spiritual context, sporting participants consider how they relate to God. The category is cause to consider any sense of a greater, ultimate reality in sport, one that allows a large vision or inspiration to guide goals in sport. It can consist of religious beliefs and practices incorporated in the sport, including the repeating of a short biblical phrase or mantra, taking to heart teachings that direct decision making, and giving thanks to God for one's abilities or the sport.

Level of Engagement: Player. Major League Baseball pitcher R. A. Dickey's autobiography offers keen insights into his life as a baseball player, which in turn reflects his search for meaning in life outside of baseball.⁸⁶ Placed between accounts of his uncertain rise to stardom and his devastating personal tragedies is a redemptive story that parallels his precarious learning of the not well-understood knuckleball pitch. Dickey's competitive drive nearly leaves him for dead, but what comes with that experience is a moment of clarity—an acceptance of God's will in the midst of the unknown and the realization of his need to embrace his life both on and off the diamond.⁸⁷ It leads to his painful disclosure about being sexually abused as a youngster. In opening up his life to God and others, he comes to a point where

86. Dickey, *Wherever I Wind Up*.

87. *Ibid.*, 224–25.

he no longer fears failure on the mound and instead finds success in pitching the unorthodox knuckleball.⁸⁸ As a player in sport, Dickey explores the spiritual context of his relationship to God. He is able to situate his life as a ball player within a quest for ultimate meaning in his life and, in turn, gives thanks to God for finding redemption on and off the field.

Conclusion

The many levels of engagement in sport reflect its significance in contemporary times and the need for Christians to more adequately respond to it. Displays of praise by Douglas and Lewis on national television fall far short of—and can even be detrimental to—the church’s mission. This paper has highlighted a relational spirituality as a means to engage several contexts that can make possible Hoffman’s desire for sport to be a rehearsal for Christian living. Sport has its limits. It is not and cannot be *the be-all* and *end-all* of living spiritually. It does, however, offer moments where the spiritual dimension comes to life, where Christians have the possibility to re-center themselves in Christian living. Circumstances present significant moments for reflection on self-identity, justice, fairness, beauty, and transcendence, making a potentially safe place to rehearse one’s actions for life outside of sport. Sport offers countless spiritual instances where moments of introspection are required to realize personal growth. In taking a broader look at sport and the many spiritual implications therein, Christians begin to understand sport more adequately and consider how churches can play a positive role in the future of sport.

Theologians, spiritual leaders, and religious educators need to take sport more seriously because of its societal influence—whether positive or negative. The point of this paper has been to embark on understanding how sport can be enabled to support the Christian life. Sport requires reform, especially at the professional levels. Yet for many, especially youth, it can serve

88. Ibid., 290.

as a time of re-creation—a time to re-create oneself, to regain or find one’s spiritual center of gravity. The North American sport reports detailed above highlight the trend that uses sport as an agent for social change;⁸⁹ churches would be wise to engage and become a partner in the reform of sport. What in the Christian tradition could be helpful in this dialogue? The list is potentially very long. Topics include continued research on a spirituality of play, the body/spirit unity in sporting experiences, and several moral questions that arise in any given sport. There is also good reason to seek out making links between a variety of historical Christian spiritualities and potential sport spiritualities. These spiritual practices could build upon the spiritual experiences garnered in sport settings. While the above descriptions of spiritual contexts and examples of different levels of engagement in sport are helpful, they are a first step. Engaging biblical, contemplative, or justice-oriented Christian practices could give a richer reflection on sporting experiences. Exerting energy toward supporting sport and its participants in the above ways goes against the grain of a more scientific and technical approach to sport. Christian thought, as part of the arts, can enhance sporting experiences. Without any doubt, however, it would be wise for this work to begin with the experiences of participants in sport. The above table on the levels of engagement in sport for recovering one’s spiritual center of gravity successfully underlines sporting experiences and gives them new life through examination of the spiritual dimension.

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