

Article

An Invitation to Suffer: Evangelicals and Sports Ministry in the U.S.

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Abstract: When American evangelicals sought to use the tools of sport for religious outreach in the mid-twentieth century, they began to wonder if the essential features of sport—competition and hierarchy—conflicted with their approach to salvation. For most evangelical Christians, salvation is an option for every human and each person must make an individual decision to accept or reject the salvific power of Jesus Christ. This is a worldview that relies heavily on separating believers from non-believers, but, importantly, the means of distinction is individual choice. There is not a competitive aspect to this framework; salvation is theoretically available for all. This article traces sports ministry's struggle over time to unite the competitive world of sport with their vision of salvation. By illuminating different approaches to the ethical challenge of uniting evangelicalism and sport, we can see that sports ministry is a field of complexity that invites believers to grapple with intense theological dilemmas without offering easy solutions. I argue that the struggle to reconcile sport and evangelical theology can be meaningful religious work. I will show that the kinds of suffering that athletic competition entails can align with the evangelical theodicy that God uses suffering to communicate with humans. It may be this feature of sport, the opportunity to experience meaningful suffering, that continues to motivate evangelicals to attempt to unite their religion with sport.

Keywords: American evangelicalism; sports ministry; Christianity; theodicy

1. Introduction

Sport and religion are two realms of human interaction that raise ethical questions and offer tools for grappling with these questions. The study of the intersections of religions and sports has much to teach us about processes of ethical formation, the evolution of institutions, how humans pursue and resist external expectations, and what new possibilities of embodied religiosity exist. This article turns to sports ministry in the U.S. to investigate the ramifications of evangelical involvement in sports. Ethnographer Saba Mahmood has taught religious studies scholars to pay attention to how external markers of piety do more than signal religious devotion; these markers also serve as a means of ethical cultivation, a way for the believer to train the self in actions and reactions that become second nature.¹ In this way, sports and religions have more in common than simple resemblance; sport can function as a religious tool or provide a setting that holds the potential for spiritual development.

Sports ministry is a term that describes (usually) conservative Christian engagement with sports. This can entail sports training in Christian contexts, education for athletes and coaches on how to combine sports and Christianity, and hosting teams and competitions with the idea of promoting the values of Christianity. This activity first emerged in an organized way in the U.S. after World War

¹ Mahmood (2005).

II. Now, there are now over 100 sports ministry organizations in the United States that involve tens of thousands of athletes, coaches, and fans. There is a sports ministry organization for nearly every imaginable sport, from basketball and soccer to surfing and rodeo. The two largest sports ministry organizations remain the multi-sport ministries of Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) and Athletes in Action (AIA), which have yearly revenue incomes of \$141 million and \$37 million respectively.² Each year, Athletes in Action hosts around 40 national and international tours for athletic teams, involving nearly 800 athletes who play against hundreds of teams and compete in front of audiences totaling in the tens of thousands. In 2017, AIA reported nearly 3000 student athletes belonged to their campus ministry, and in 2018, FCA had a campus presence at over 18,000 middle schools, high schools, and colleges. Additionally, FCA reported that over 88,000 athletes and coaches attended one of their 771 summer camps.³

The extent of these national organizations is striking, but these numbers only hint at the growth of sports ministry at a local level. As more and more athletes grew up affiliating their athletic and religious experiences, careers in sports ministry seemed increasingly viable options. Athletes unable or unwilling to pursue careers as professional athletes are able to coach or play for Christian teams at multiple levels—from youth club teams to Christian high schools and colleges to semi-professional and professional Christian teams. Coaching positions at explicitly Christian colleges and universities are especially appealing career options for Christian athletes. In 2011, there were over 500 coaching positions and over 100 sports administrative positions at just 33 Christian colleges.⁴

While sports ministry has continued to grow, the Christians involved have had to continually confront an internal contradiction. Shortly after evangelicals developed sports ministry, they began to wonder if the essential features of sport—competition and hierarchy—conflicted with their approach to salvation. For most evangelical Christians, salvation is an option for every human and each person must make an individual decision to accept or reject the salvific power of Jesus Christ. This article traces sports ministry's struggle over time to unite the competitive world of sport with their vision of salvation. By illuminating different approaches to the ethical challenge of uniting evangelicalism and sport, we can see that sports ministry is a field of complexity that invites believers to grapple with intense theological dilemmas without offering easy solutions. I argue that the struggle to reconcile sport and evangelical theology can be meaningful religious work. I will show that the kinds of suffering that athletic competition entails can align with the evangelical theodicy that God uses suffering to communicate with humans. It may be this feature of sport, the opportunity to experience meaningful suffering, that continues to motivate evangelicals to attempt to unite their religion with sport.

From 2006 to 2008, I conducted anthropological fieldwork with Christian athletes in the U.S.⁵ During that time, I attended meetings of Athletes in Action at UNC-Chapel Hill, where I was working on my dissertation. I attended two summer camps for high school athletes hosted by Fellowship of Christian Athletes; I traveled with Athletes in Action's women's basketball team for an exhibition tour; and I spent a competitive season with the Charlotte Lady Eagles, a semi-professional soccer team owned and operated by Ministry Athletes International. I also visited the headquarters of Athletes in Action in Xenia, Ohio and Fellowship of Christian Athletes in Kansas City, Missouri to explore their archives and interview organizational leaders. After my fieldwork, I conducted follow up interviews with athletes and, over the course of this work, I came to a much more complex understanding of

² "Fulfilling the Vision: The Fellowship of Christian Athletes 2018 Ministry Report", Fellowship of Christian Athletes; "Athletes in Action Annual Report: 2017", Athletes in Action.

³ This is an increase of about 35,000 attendees over the past four years. "2012 Ministry Report", Fellowship of Christian Athletes.

⁴ Much appreciation to my research assistant, Kendall Hughes, for amassing this data.

⁵ When I conducted research at a field site, I always had a pen and notebook in my hands. I jotted down details and phrases intended to later jog my memory of what was going on. I reserved several hours every evening for typing up thorough accounts of the day's proceedings using my notebook jottings to guide my recollections. I found my notebook strategy to be much less intrusive than a tape recorder and so made handwritten notes during conversations and informal interviews. These too I typed later in a more thoroughly fleshed out way. For a full description of this approach, see Emerson et al. (2011).

sports, ministry, and sports ministry than I had when I began my research.⁶ I am an outsider to both sports and evangelical Christianity: I am not an athlete and I am not a Christian. I grew up hating sports. I thought sports were boring, dangerous, and stupid. I should also confess that when I started the project, I also thought Christians were boring, dangerous, and stupid.

Years later, at an interview for a tenure-track job, I shared my research and presented Christian athletes as engaged in an ethical struggle to align their deeply held religious beliefs with sports, a realm of culture that is violent and hierarchical.⁷ I had come to see sports ministry as a complicated project, impossible to dismiss as trivial or frivolous. When one of the faculty members interviewing me asked me the question, “But, are they just stupid?” I was taken aback. I remember floundering and answering something like, “No, most of them go to college”. This was an unsatisfying answer for the person who asked as apparently going to college did not meet their standard of “not stupid”. In the moment of struggling to answer that question, it was clear to me that I no longer saw this group as dangerously naive, but as complex humans just as capable as I was of seeing the good and bad consequences of attempting to combine evangelicalism and sport.

2. An Encounter with Contradiction

Let me start at the beginning.⁸ With the rise of televised sports in the United States in the 1950s, some American Christians began to see sport as a resource for evangelism. Sports ministry founders imagined celebrity athletes as spokespeople with the respect of a non-believing population and potential to garner a large audience. By the late 1950s and 1960s, evangelical Christians began recruiting celebrity athletes who were Christian to present evangelical Christianity as a strong, moral, and important life choice. For example, by 1965, Oral Roberts was overt about promoting sports at his university in Tulsa, Oklahoma. He said, “Athletics is part of our Christian witness ... Nearly every man in America reads the sports pages, and a Christian school cannot ignore these people ... Sports are becoming the No. 1 interest of people in America. For us to be relevant, we had to gain the attention of millions of people in a way that they could understand”.⁹ Evangelicals entered the sports world in droves, forming organizations that educated athletes on how to deliver their Christian testimony from the platform of sport.

The message that these men sought to promote was a message of Christian salvation. In the evangelical worldview, it is only those who hear and accept this message that can go to heaven after death. Evangelicals rely heavily on separating believers from non-believers, but importantly, the means

⁶ This research culminated in my book, [Blazer \(2015\)](#). In the book, I show that a shift away from recruiting celebrities, coinciding with Title IX’s expansion of sports opportunities for women, led to women outnumbering men as participants in sports ministry. A full exploration of gender dynamics is beyond the scope of this article, and I instead generalize Christian athletes’ experiences.

⁷ In an attempt to determine the limits to the category of sport, sociologists of sport like J.J. Coakley have emphasized that sport has the following features: “sports are institutionalized competitive activities that involve rigorous physical exertion or the use of relatively complex physical skills by participants motivated by personal enjoyment and external rewards”. Using this definition, sociologists can distinguish sports from mental competitions like chess or spelling bees, from non-competitive activities like yoga or hiking, from informal non-institutionalized activities like kids playing tag, and from activities done *primarily* for personal enjoyment (play) or *primarily* for external reward (dramatic spectacle). [Coakley \(2001\)](#), p. 20.

⁸ Of course, this is only one beginning. Sports ministry has a historical precedent in muscular Christianity, a turn-of-the-century movement that emphasized strength and manliness as Christian obligations. Muscular Christianity emerged in Britain in the 1850s and quickly spread to the U.S. Thomas Hughes’s *Tom Brown adventure stories* were the most crucial literature promoting this ideology. The most popular of the series, *Tom Brown’s School Days*, chronicled the coming of age of young Tom Brown, a rugby player at a private boarding school. Through physical education, Brown developed a fighting spirit that allowed him to defeat bullies and defend his friends. He was the fictional epitome of the muscular Christian ethos—the idea that boys turn into men through dedication to hard work and that Christian moral character can be achieved through athletic training. [Hughes \(1857\)](#). For analysis of the phenomenon of muscular Christianity, see [Putney \(2001\)](#). Historians have noted that the late nineteenth and early twentieth century saw the rise of the use of the term “character-building”, which carried Protestant connotations. See [Macleod \(2004\)](#); [Bundgaard \(2005\)](#). A major muscular Christian institution was the Young Men’s Christian Association. On the cultural context and effects of the YMCA’s emphasis on physical education, see [Gustav-Wrathall \(1998\)](#); [Mjagkij and Spratt \(1997\)](#); [Winter \(2002\)](#).

⁹ Quoted in [Coakley \(2001\)](#), p. 470).

of distinction is individual choice—there is not a competitive aspect to this framework; salvation is theoretically available for all.

The underlying logic of sport contradicted this democratic understanding of Christian salvation. Competition and hierarchical organization are defining features of sport. Sport organizes everything in its realm along hierarchical means; leagues are ranked, teams are ranked, team members are ranked. This means that those at the top of the hierarchy are very valuable, both as athletes and as salespeople. The power of these celebrities inspired evangelicals to begin sports ministry, but they came to realize that the same ideology that allowed sporting celebrities to wield significant cultural power also made them morally vulnerable. If one's power (both in the sports world and as an evangelist) is contingent on winning, then winning remains a central and unchallenged goal of sport. Reconciling winning (or losing) with evangelism proved difficult. Christian writers such as Shirl Hoffman argued that in order to win, athletes took on a “killer instinct” that overshadowed Christian morality.¹⁰

Engagement with sport led some sports ministry leaders to reconsider their ethics and priorities. At first, they thought celebrity athletes would make good spokespeople because of their cultural power, but soon, these same evangelicals began to see sport as morally dubious. Rather than turn away from sport, they leaned into this contradiction. While it is easy for outsiders to see this as compartmentalization, as evangelicals using sport without considering the ethical ramifications, I want to argue instead that sports ministry offered everyday evangelicals a chance to grapple with serious and ongoing theological dilemmas, and that this grappling can be deeply satisfying for some Christian athletes.

By the 1970s, the tension between playing to win and playing with moral compassion became apparent to both insiders and outsiders of sports ministry. From the outside, *Sports Illustrated* writer Frank Deford leveled a scathing critique against what he called “Sportianity”. He wrote, “To put it bluntly, athletes are being used to sell religion. They endorse Jesus, much as they would a new sneaker or a graphite-shafted driver”.¹¹ In the 1970s, when Deford's critique appeared, reevaluations of sport from an ethical perspective were increasingly common. Like Deford, many assumed that Christian commitment would entail a moral obligation to improve sport, making Christian athletic celebrities easy targets. Deford claimed, “Sportianity does not question the casual brutality [of sports] ... It does not censure the intemperate behavior of coaches ... The fear of taking a stand on moral issues is acute”.¹²

While evangelicals first perceived sport an ideal resource because of the power of athletic celebrities to attract cultural attention, when they began to engage the world of sport, they encountered a deficiency with their strategy. Sport raised the question: do the ends justify the means? Sporting celebrities could draw attention to Christianity, but if they also behaved in morally questionable ways on (or off) the field, was this attention achieving its goal of promoting Christianity?

I cannot overstate the importance of this ethical dilemma for sports ministry. Evangelicals continue to grapple with this contradiction and continue to disagree with each other as to the appropriate response. But one thing that began to happen in the 1970s was that sports ministers started to talk about the project of sports ministry differently. While celebrity athletes were still the cornerstone of the movement, some significant voices began to promote sports participation as a way to feel connected to the divine and to experience a sensation of Christ-likeness, a very different goal than outreach to non-believers.

The career and publications of Wes Neal illustrate this shift. Neal was a weightlifter who traveled with Athletes in Action's weightlifting team in the late 1960s. When Neal entered sports ministry, he felt that Christian athletes could and should be different from non-Christian athletes, yet he noticed

¹⁰ Hoffman (2010); Hoffman (1992).

¹¹ Deford (1976a, p. 55). This was part of a three article series on “Sportianity”. The full series included: Deford (1976b, pp. 88–102); Deford (1976c, pp. 54–69); Deford (1976d, pp. 42–60).

¹² Deford (1976e, p. 65).

that their faith did not seem to influence their athletic behavior. He told me when I interviewed him, “I wasn’t any different from a non-Christian in my athletics. I was still nervous before competition. I still had all the same ups and downs as a non-Christian. We used to train at a gym in southern California and a lot of the college football lifters would look up to us to try to learn about being a Christian athlete. Of course, we didn’t know any more about it than they did”.

One day, Neal was lifting weights at this gym, and he missed a lift. “I knew I would get pinned, so I had to push myself away from the bar. I was so frustrated that I smashed my fist on the platform”. His fiancé, Peggy, approached him, asking, “Are you angry?” When Neal denied that he was angry, Peggy said, “Well, they all think you are”, gesturing to the college football players. Neal told me, “I was so embarrassed and humiliated. I vowed that would never happen again”. For Neal, this experience was evidence that something was lacking in his Christian athletic training. He did not think that his behavior was an accurate reflection of his beliefs and his identity as a Christian.

Similar to Neal, Gary Warner, editor of *The Christian Athlete* (FCA’s member publication) in the 1970s, voiced frustration with his own sporting behavior after his conversion to Christianity. He wrote in his 1979 book, *Competition*:

My faith had no practical application to my competitiveness. I was the same old person between the base lines. I cursed, I lost control, I was obsessed with winning. I would manipulate and do whatever it took to win. I slid into bases with my spikes high, and if a baserunner did not get down to the double play, I had no qualms about putting the ball between his eyes. From the bench, I heaped abuse on opponents and referees. After all, this was competition. This was being an athlete. And no one modeled a Christian difference for me to see.¹³

Warner began to question why his faith did not affect the way he played sports.

Neal and Warner’s discontent emerged at the same time as Deford’s articles on “Sportianity”. According to Deford, Sportianity involved a declaration of Christian beliefs yet did not require ethical improvements. Deford wrote, “In the process of dozens of interviews with people in Sportianity, not one remotely suggested any direct effort was being considered to improve the morality of athletics”.¹⁴ Deford conjectured that this lack of attention to sporting morality stemmed from sports ministry’s dependence on athletic celebrity. As Deford saw it, the ministry benefited from sports’ promotion of hero-worship of winning athletes. Since sports ministry used the system for evangelism, sports ministers would be unlikely to seek significant changes in the organizing principles of competitive sport. “[N]o one in the movement—much less any organization—speaks out against the cheating in sport, against dirty play; no one attacks the evils of recruiting, racism or any of the many other well-known excesses and abuses . . . Sportianity seems prepared to accept athletics as is, more devoted to exploiting sport than serving it”.¹⁵

Deford wrote three articles for *Sports Illustrated* on “Sportianity”. In the second and third articles, he tempered his critique somewhat and introduced “Sportians” who expressed concerns about moral issues in sport. For example, Deford pointed to a 1972 article entitled “Sports and War” that appeared in *The Christian Athlete* while Gary Warner served as editor. This article featured juxtaposed pictures of injured athletes and fallen soldiers in Vietnam, linebackers and the front line. The article decried the growing emphasis on winning and cautioned against treating the world like a sporting competition.

In the midst of the most complex time in our nation’s history, we are witnessing a phenomenal growth of our athletic institutions. Sports has become the national conversation, complete with its own peculiar grammar and vocabulary. It has absorbed our passions in its fantasy

¹³ Warner (1979a, p. 45).

¹⁴ Deford (1976f, p. 100).

¹⁵ Deford (1976g, p. 102).

world of winners and losers. Sports has proven compatible with our view of the world as a dichotomy of winners and losers. In fact, we seem to retreat into sport in order to deny the complexity and ambiguity that marks the political, social, and religious issues of our time.¹⁶

The article went so far as to argue that sports ministry needed to take seriously the conflation of sports and war in the U.S. and rethink Christian involvement in both. Rather than using sport as a platform for witnessing, this article called on sports ministry to bring Christian beliefs and practices to bear on actual athletic behavior.

Around the same time, Dave Meggyesy, pro-football player turned Marxist critic, emerged as a significant voice paralleling the ideologies of sport and war.¹⁷ In the early 1970s, during a debate between several prominent coaches, athletes and sportswriters, Meggyesy critiqued the sporting establishment, saying, “I love athletics, but the horror is what we do to each other in the name of the system”. Warner was in the audience and described the event, “There was no debate. The rejoinders were platitudes and clichés and, at times, so childishly sophomoric that the audience broke into laughter. I wanted to cry. Upon leaving I determined that the ramifications of competition for the Christian had to be spoken to”.¹⁸

This may have been what led Warner to include a series of articles in *Sharing the Victory* (previously *The Christian Athlete*) called the “Sports Conscience series”. In these articles, leaders in sports ministry voiced a number of perspectives on how to deal with sports’ creation of and reliance on hierarchy. The series ran from January of 1984 to June of 1987 and included twenty articles that took on ethical issues that emerged from combining Christianity and sports. From the first issue in the series, authors suggested radical shifts in Christian approaches to sport. The first article, “Where Have All the Athletes Gone?” mourned the competitive nature of high school sports tryouts, and suggested changing high school sports so that every student can play. The author saw intramural sports as a cop-out that created a hierarchy among high school athletes and suggested that high schools form multiple varsity teams to accommodate all interested students.¹⁹

A few issues later, the article “Winning T’aint What It Used to Be” argued that sporting situations that over-emphasize winning will inevitably lead to cheating: “When winning is the bottom line, it’s no wonder that folks cheat”. The author argued that the solution to this unhealthy situation was to emphasize the process of playing over the outcome of winning or losing.²⁰ Taking this sentiment a step further, Neil Wolkodoff, interviewed in January 1985’s article, “Let’s Redefine Winning”, argued that professional sports are not inherently character building; the pressure to win at all costs leads to over-protection of the athlete, rather than allowing the character of that athlete to develop. For Wolkodoff, redefining winning meant measuring how much an athlete fulfilled their God-given potential, rather than how many points they scored. He argued for interventions at the youth level to reconceive winning as achieving one’s personal best rather than defeating an opponent.²¹

In perhaps the most radical of the series, FCA co-founder Rev. Roe Johnston wrote in “No Challenge, No Adventure” that FCA should dig in and rethink college athletics, the Olympics, and FCA’s role in the sports world. Noting that college athletes often experience exploitation for the benefit of their school, Johnston wrote, “We need to get into complex issues and study them deeply enough to make a significant contribution I’d like to see FCA talking to athletes about what education and exploitation are all about”. He worried that the Olympics promoted an unhealthy nationalism and

¹⁶ Pile (1972, pp. 2–8). Sports historians have noted that the 1950s through the 1970s constituted a period of major change for American sports. For scholarship on sports and the Vietnam War, see Zang (2001); Jay (2006). For changes in race relations, see Marqusee (1999); Demas (2010); Martin (2010). For accounts of second wave feminism and sport, see Ware (2011); Flintoff and Scraton (2002); Hogshead-Makar and Zimbalist (2007).

¹⁷ Meggyesy (1970).

¹⁸ Warner (1979b, p. 11).

¹⁹ *Sharing the Victory* (1984a).

²⁰ *Sharing the Victory* (1984b).

²¹ *Sharing the Victory* (1985).

hoped FCA would take a stand to de-nationalize the games by ending score-keeping and the playing of national anthems. He proposed that FCA support non-competitive games that everyone can play and implement an annual competition that would award the most creative non-competitive game invented that year. He wrote, “Most of our games are designed to follow culture; let’s design some to get ahead of it”. By this, he meant that FCA could use their clout to promote democratic gaming that emphasized everyone’s success, rather than dividing participants into winners and losers.²²

In the following article, “No Place for Violence”, Russ Ramsey, author of the family authorized biography of Christian sprinter Eric Liddell (made famous by the 1981 Academy Award Best Picture film *Chariots of Fire*)²³ unfavorably compared U.S. sports fans with Russian sports fans, noting that U.S. fans were more likely to boo and to react violently. “With televised contests before crowds of 80,000, the potential for calming or inciting the masses today is awesome”, Ramsey noted, emphasizing that FCA should think about how to use these audience numbers for social good.²⁴ Similarly, the June 1986 article, “Sportsviewing: Relaxation or Obsession?” compared sports viewing to an addiction like alcoholism or drug abuse with the power to pull a believer away from Christ. Author Larry Clark claimed, “Only a hardnosed Puritan would see anything wrong with enjoying a game, yet when I observe how athletics seem to be gradually eroding values necessary for a strong society, I think twice about total obsession with the game”. He bemoaned the athletic establishment treating athletes as assets instead of people and worried that sports fans risked letting the cutthroat values of big-time sport become their own.²⁵

Taken as a whole, these articles show that sports ministers were not naïve about the potential pitfalls of combining their religion and sport. They noted the downsides of competition, holding athletes to a high moral standard, and the mob mentality that sports viewing can cultivate. Their proposed solutions were radical and unlikely, but they were willing to imagine fully dismantling sport in order to bring sport into alignment with their values.

Wes Neal’s emerging approach to sports ministry took on the goal of redefining winning. For Neal, the essential difference between a Christian and a non-Christian athlete was that a Christian athlete had access to God. He believed that because Christian athletes have access to God, they can use sport as a way to connect with God. In this way, Neal no longer defined success in sport as winning the competition; he thought of success as the feeling of connecting with Jesus Christ. This feeling was the goal, and Neal called this experience “winning”.

He told me, “For example, I was in this tennis tournament where I was playing a 60 year old guy who had been a state champ in his youth. Everyone thought that I would clobber him, but he was creaming the daylights out of me”.

Neal’s wife Peggy knew Neal’s principles and the terminology, and she called to him from the sidelines, “Wes, are you winning?”

“I told her, ‘Yes. I am. I really am.’ The guy must have thought I was crazy”.

This anecdote reveals some of the difficulties Neal encountered in his developing theology. He wanted to redefine winning as experiential rather than comparative, but sport is competitive and does keep score and promotes an idea of winning that is measurable by points, not by feelings.

One reason I think the ethical dilemmas of sports ministry matter is because they can reveal the unintended consequences of religious actions. Early sports ministers intended to elevate and celebrate strong, winning men as magnets for evangelical Christianity. But, almost immediately, they encountered an ethical dilemma, and they had to rethink what they were doing with sports. Using evangelical athletes to “sell” salvation required a compartmentalization of sporting and religious

²² Johnston (1985).

²³ Ramey (1985); Hugh Hudson (1981).

²⁴ Ramsey (1985).

²⁵ Clark (1986).

lives that some sports ministers found dissatisfying. In an attempt to investigate and remedy their dissatisfaction, sports ministers like Neal and Warner promoted the idea that sport could be an avenue for connection with the divine. This emergent understanding of sport remains quite compelling for Christian athletes and is central to most sports ministry missions today. But, it is important to note that the impulse toward winning (in the traditional way) did not go away. The tension remains: should a Christian athlete try to win in order to influence others or play compassionately in order to experience connection to the divine? The quest to integrate these goals continues to animate sports ministry.

3. An Engagement with Theodicy

The ethical issues that emerged in early sports ministry remain one of the most compelling critiques of Christian involvement in sports. Even though evangelicals have been heartily involved in sports at every level of competition for more than fifty years, sport has not changed and continues to promote hierarchy, value winners and dismiss losers, and exploit bodies for financial gain. It is worth considering that these elements of sport may not be antithetical to sports ministry, but may form a basis for engagement with sport that reveals evangelical theodicy. A theodicy is a solution to the problem of evil, the idea that bad things happen to innocent people even though God is a loving and all-knowing being. Different philosophers of religion from different traditions have struggled with this contradiction between human experience and divine love/power for thousands of years. In Annie Dillard's *For the Time Being*, she grapples with the problem of evil through a rumination on birth defects, the meaninglessness of high numbers, and the suffering of the thoughtful. For example, she describes the gruesome death of Rabbi Akiva, flayed alive at the age of 85 at the order of Emperor Hadrian of Rome. She imagines Moses in heaven complaining to God that this torture and martyrdom is unnecessary. "Moses' question—the tough one about God's allowing human, moral evil—is reasonable only if we believe that a good God causes, or at any rate allows, everything that happens, and that it's all for the best".²⁶ To try to make sense of suffering in the world, many evangelicals have embraced the idea that God uses suffering to communicate with humans. If a believer accepts the founding myth of Christianity, that God allowed the painful and gruesome death of Jesus in order to communicate a message of salvation to humans, then that person might be likely to see human suffering as part of God's plan.

Take for example, Tess, a player I observed on the Charlotte Lady Eagles.²⁷ At the second team practice of the season, the players were running drills on the pre-dawn field. I was sitting with Emily, the assistant coach, and watching the team run. We all saw Tess fall. It was fast, her body arching back to grab the back of her leg as she hit the ground. She was on the ground in a split second, the other players struggling to slow their stride and pull back to check on her. They formed a circle to pray as someone helped Tess limp off the field. The trauma of injury was not rare in these athletes' lives, and they understood that injury was more than pain in the body; it also led to exclusion and devaluation in their athletic lives.

Tess sat down to catch her breath and put an ice pack on her hamstring. It was only a few minutes later that she said, "This is the worst it's ever been. I really feel like God doesn't want me playing. I feel like he wants me here, but every time I play, it's something".

Just the day before, Amanda, a veteran player on the team, had told everyone, "I'm really surprised that God brought me back here. He and I had a moment about two years ago, and I thought I was done. He just really told me, you're still being a soccer player, you need to be a child of God. I thought, oh no, he doesn't need me on this team. And it was really scary, but I learned a lot. And a week later I found out I was pregnant. And, it's a long story but, basically he kept me from finding out that I was

²⁶ Dillard (1999, p. 29).

²⁷ In this article, fieldwork informants have pseudonyms to preserve confidentiality. These pseudonyms are consistent throughout the text and consistent with my previously published work. Whenever I quote someone without a citation, this was an interaction that occurred during fieldwork, interview, or informal conversation.

pregnant until after we had had that moment. Because otherwise, it would have been real easy for me to walk away and still be a soccer player”.

These reflections on why a player’s body does not allow them to play, through injury or pregnancy, illustrate the overarching theodicy at work in sports ministry: God uses suffering to communicate with humans. For many Christian athletes, the struggle to keep God at the center of their lives is made more difficult by the pressures of sport like competition, team dynamics, coaching dynamics, and embodied sensations like fatigue and soreness. I want to suggest that the struggle to maintain distinction in these circumstances is what makes sports ministry meaningful for believers. An invitation to experience sport as religiously meaningful means an invitation to struggle, to grapple, to surrender one’s body to the project of one’s religion. It takes real and ongoing work on the part of a believer to continually attempt to work out God’s will through experiences of winning and losing, injury and healing, making the team and getting benched.

Sporting competition and evangelical salvation operate based on two different kinds of logic. The logic of sporting competition is that players submit to a set of rules, expecting that the competition will yield winners and losers. While some forms of Christianity may resemble sport by promoting the idea that following rules can be a means for attaining salvation, one fundamental tenet of evangelicalism is that salvation is available to all regardless of moral behavior. (Many evangelicals believe that the individual choice for salvation will result in moral behavior, but do not see moral behavior as a prerequisite for salvation.) By contrast, sporting competitions occur according to previously agreed upon rules and the outcome is hierarchical: someone has won and someone has lost.

Integrating the knowledge that sport reveals inequality with the sense that God equally loves all humans is difficult. Recently, a group of Christian coaches, administrators, theologians, and academics formed “The Sport and Christianity Group” to provide a manifesto on the relationship between Christianity and sport. Founders of this group include Shirl Hoffman, prolific author and prominent voice in bringing attention to the ethical conflicts between Christianity and sports; Valerie Gin, Professor and Chair of the Department of Recreation, Sport and Wellness at Gordon College and co-author of the book *Focus on Sport in Ministry*, a well-regarded resource for sports ministers²⁸; Nick Watson, co-director of the Centre for Sport, Spirituality and Religion at the University of Gloucestershire, UK, and co-author of *Sport and Spirituality: An Introduction*, a text that investigates multiple ethical issues in combining sport with Christianity²⁹; and Steven Waller, an associate professor in the recreation and sport management program, Department of Kinesiology, Recreation, and Sport Studies at The University of Tennessee- Knoxville and current president of the Christian Society for Kinesiology, Leisure and Sport Studies, the dominant organization in the U.S. for the Christian investigation of the relationship between Christianity and sports.

The Sport and Christianity Group launched by publishing a “Declaration on Sport and the Christian Life” that was in many ways a response to the issues that a previous generation of sports ministers encountered.³⁰ *Sports Illustrated* writer Frank DeFord was surprised that “Sportians” did not try to change sport and, as I have shown, some sports ministry leaders in the 1970s and 1980s proposed radical changes to sport and to Christian involvement in sport. In this newest response to the ethical critique that Christian involvement in sports ignores the darker side of competition, the authors began by asserting that sport has a legitimate place in Christian life. They argued that sport can assist spiritual formation (“Sport can help focus our attention on the reality of God and our humanness in special ways offering formative experiences in which God communes with us”), Christian education (“Sport is an effective complement to classroom knowledge when wisely integrated into Christian schools and universities”), and outreach to non-believers (“We can delight in our role as Christ-followers in the

²⁸ McCown and Gin (2003).

²⁹ Jim Parry et al. (2007).

³⁰ Sport and Christianity (2014).

world of sport and understand that our behavior in contests is a form of witness to the kingdom of God".) Recognizing that sports participation and fandom could also have downsides like fostering self-centeredness, mean-spirited competitiveness, and unhealthy training that can result in injury, the authors noted that Christians could use their faith to circumvent these challenges by emphasizing glorifying God, playful antagonism, and treating the human body as a reflection of the image of God.

"Declaration on Sport and the Christian Life" represents the latest in a long line of attempts to validate evangelical engagement with sport. While some 1970s evangelicals questioned whether sport could be good for Christians, the authors of "Declaration on Sport and the Christian Life" argued that the benefits of engagement with sport far outweighed the risks. According to the manifesto, "In competition, players test their skills and strategies in an environment of uncertainty and drama". The uncertainty and drama of sport is not incidental; it is the core of the experience of not only competition but of the evangelical challenge to continually see human experiences as divine communications. As the authors put it, "We thank God for the good moments of sports, yet we also thank him for apparently bad moments—all for His purposes". In this worldview, moments of struggle or pain may appear to be bad, but for the believer, they are mechanisms to tune into God's purposes and glimpse a greater meaning to reality.

Far from dismantling sport, this declaration promoted a kind of sporting engagement that the authors hope will allow Christians to compete *and* to spiritually benefit. For every benefit that they identify, however, they acknowledge that the same aspect can become a drawback. For example, one of their precepts, "Sport has many benefits, but they are conditional", reads:

When we do sport well it has the potential to improve health, develop social and familial relationships, strengthen moral character, foster positive life habits and civic engagement, and act as a vehicle for peace, reconciliation, and the witness of the good news of Jesus Christ. But these effects are conditional. Their realization depends upon the moral and symbolic meanings we give to sport as well as the motivations of the participants. It should not be assumed that sport, irrespective of these considerations, will have its intended beneficial effects.

According to this statement, for Christians to do sport well, they must intentionally imbue sport with religious meaning and vigilantly police their own motivations. This is hard work. It is challenging to discern one's own motivations in the throes of athletic competition. I want to suggest that paying attention to struggling, failing, and suffering may be crucial for understanding ongoing Christian involvement in sport.

4. An Invitation to Suffer

Kurt Vonnegut's famous short story "Harrison Bergeron" imagined a world in which no person could be smarter, better looking, or more athletically capable than any other. He presented a dystopian vision of ballerinas handicapped with bags of weights around their necks to prevent them from being more graceful and grotesque masks on their faces to prevent them from being more beautiful than anyone else.³¹ Vonnegut's story reminds us that inequality is part of human life. Frank DeFord thought that "Sportians" would try to revolutionize sport, and some of them have tried, but the inequality of sport makes it a proxy for our world. The capriciousness of a pulled hamstring, the injustice of a ref looking the other way, the struggle to do your best even though someone else will always be better than you—these are chances to practice applying theodicy, opportunities for evangelicals to accept and embrace their theological understanding that God uses suffering to communicate with humans.

Redefining winning using an individualized mechanism (playing your best, trying your hardest) has never caught on in sports ministry. This move was doomed to fail because it does not take seriously

³¹ Kurt (1968, pp. 7–14).

the generative power of trying and losing. The invitation to suffer matters because it allows the athlete to imagine their own resemblance to Jesus; to inhabit a space of destiny, submission, and meaning. Those feelings matter quite a bit to Christian athletes. Getting rid of winning and losing changes the stakes, and higher stakes matter because they force Christian athletes to grapple with contradictory impulses: the desire to win and the desire to show compassion. Compassion under duress is more valuable because it is more similar to the compassion that Christ shows humans in the central myth of Christianity. Wes Neal wrote in *The Handbook on Athletic Perfection*:

It was the attitude of Jesus that brought Him through punishing physical torment that would have stopped other men in the starting blocks ... You must have Jesus' attitude in your athletic performance if you are to conform to his likeness.³²

When I first read this, I thought that emulating the attitude of Jesus was a pragmatic tool to endure pain and fatigue. However, there is another level to this comparison. This mythical metaphor only works if sport is hard. Really hard. And hard in several different ways—hard on the body, hard on one's self-esteem, hard on relationships, to name a few struggles. Focusing on the inconsistencies and internal contradictions of evangelical engagement with sport (like a failure to redefine sport to be democratic and in line with evangelicals' stances on the possibility of salvation for all humans) can obscure the theological benefit of these very inconsistencies. Getting hurt is part of it; feeling pain and strength in one's own body is, in fact, central to the enterprise.

Humans are capable of knowing that two contradictory things can be true at the same time. Wendy Doniger calls this a peculiar kind of double vision. She notes that myth allows humans to simultaneously engage "two ends of the continuum, the same and the different, the general and the particular". She provides the example of Roland Barthes describing sitting in a car and looking out the window at the scenery: both the glass and the landscape are simultaneously there and not there.³³ Christian athletes can hold at the same time an awareness that sport is ethically troubling and a sense of the theological benefit to playing sports. The glass and the view beyond exist at the same time.

Sport works this way because it demands so much from the body. The day after Tess fell on the field, certain that God did not want her playing, she came to practice and told Emily and I that her injury was a pulled hamstring that she would heal through physical therapy and be back on the field in a few weeks. When her teammates took the field to run drills and scrimmages, she grabbed a soccer ball and headed to the sidelines, holding the ball in front of her chest while she squatted and lunged around and around the field, executing her physical therapy exercises. Her injury became an opportunity for meaningful suffering.

I have previously argued that evangelical Christianity and sport cohered over time because of their similar gender paradigms and understandings of the value of submission to authority, but perhaps the most powerful reason evangelical Christians continue to turn to sport is that sport is a terrain of suffering. For some evangelicals, suffering can be an opportunity to feel a sense of meaning; their theodicy is that pain has a purpose. Sports ministry is an invitation to suffer.

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³² Neal (2003, p. 32).

³³ Doniger (2011, pp. 7–8).

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