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Religiosity Moderates Goal Courage and Self-Worth in Collegiate Christian Athletes

Elizabeth M. Bounds [1,*], Jenae M. Nelson [1], Karen K. Melton [2], Perry L. Glanzer [3] and Sarah A. Schnitker [1]

[1] Department of Psychology and Neuroscience, Baylor University, Waco, TX 76706, USA; jenae_nelson@baylor.edu (J.M.N.); sarah_schnitker@baylor.edu (S.A.S.)
[2] Department of Human Sciences and Design, Faculty, Baylor University, Waco, TX 76706, USA; karen_melton@baylor.edu
[3] Department of Educational Leadership, Faculty, Baylor University, Waco, TX 76706, USA; perry_glanzer@baylor.edu
* Correspondence: elizabeth_bounds@baylor.edu

Abstract: Research shows that the effects of athletics on virtue development are mixed. Religion provides people with a meaning-making system, community, and practices that can promote the cultivation of virtues and possibly enhance the impact of athletics on virtue development. Yet, little empirical research has assessed moral outcomes when religion and sport interact. The present study examines intrinsic religiosity as a moderator of the effect of athletic involvement on virtue and self-worth outcomes in collegiate student-athletes. Participants (N = 1930) were religious college students in the United States, 22% (n = 415) competing in an intercollegiate varsity sport. Moderated regression analyses revealed, contrary to predictions, that religiosity did not significantly moderate trait courage, trait patience, or goal patience. Consistent with predictions, religiosity significantly moderated goal courage, approval self-worth (i.e., the extent to which people base their worth on approval from others), and moral self-worth (i.e., the extent to which people base their worth on their own virtuousness). Whereas religiosity was associated with higher goal courage for non-athletes, the association was stronger for athletes. Religiosity was not associated with levels of approval self-worth for non-athletes, but the more religious athletes were, the less important other people's approval was for their sense of self. Whereas religiosity was associated with higher moral self-worth contingency for athletes, the association was stronger for non-athletes. Applications for practitioners and future directions for researchers are discussed.

Keywords: sport; intrinsic religiosity; virtue development; courage; patience; contingent self-worth

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1. Introduction

A person's religiosity can uniquely interact with athletic contexts to cultivate admirable moral and mental fortitude in competitors. Consider the example of former United States Soccer Women's National Team player Marci Jobson[1], who reached the pinnacle of success in her field: competing for the World Cup in 2007. Jobson has reflected on her national team experience, asking, "Who really cares if it's not for something more? If we do not do it for a bigger purpose?" (Jobson 2021). Passionate about merging her Christian faith with the game of soccer, Jobson has relied on her bigger purpose of faith to give her strength and courage in the face of adversity as a professional athlete and Division I college coach. A religion can provide competitors with an identity that, when adopted and internalized, promotes the development of virtues and shapes their approach to sport.

Examining virtues in athletic contexts is essential because sportspeople often assume that sport positively affects character, but this is not always the case. Whether sport cultivates virtues in people depends on other social and motivational factors (Bredemeier and Shields 2006; Schnitker et al. 2020c), such as religiosity. The present study moves

beyond the main effects of athletic involvement on moral outcomes to examine religiosity as a moderator, asking the following question: does the effect of sport on moral and identity outcomes differ depending on how religious a person is? Athletic involvement meets basic needs such as competency and belonging (Deci and Ryan 2012), and religion can provide a meaning-making system, community, and practices (Park et al. 2013; Schnitker et al. 2019b). The present study examines how sport and religiosity interact to predict virtue (i.e., courage and patience) and self-worth (i.e., approval and moral self-worth) outcomes.

1.1. Definitions: Religion, Religiosity, and Virtue Development

Although religion can be defined in both functional and substantive ways, this paper will rely upon a substantive definition of religion to refer to the formally identified world religions commonly included in sociology of religion surveys (e.g., Christian, Hindu, Muslim, etc.). This article, however, is primarily interested in what can be defined as religiosity, the degree to which a person adopts and internalizes a religion by engaging in the specific religion's traditions, experiencing the Divine (e.g., God), and making it intrinsic to all of life (e.g., "I try to carry my religion over into all other dealings in life"; Koenig and Büssing 2010).

Scholars have argued that a virtue is a hybrid personality unit composed of characteristic adaptations (e.g., goals, mental schemas, reappraisals) and a transcendent narrative identity (i.e., bigger than self; Schnitker et al. 2019b). Building on this classification, other scholars have defined a virtue as a dispositional and deep-seated habit performed for the right reasons, which contributes to a flourishing life (Ratchford et al. 2023b). Character, then, might be understood as the summation of a person's virtuous habits or their global disposition to respond appropriately to situational demands based on chronically accessible self-transcendent motivations (Lapsley and Narvaez 2014).

Furthermore, agricultural metaphors (e.g., "cultivate") aptly represent the ecological process of virtue development, where people rely on their communities and meaning-making systems to bring about moral growth over time (Lerner 2019). For example, a particular religion, when internalized, provides people with a telos for their development, and people thrive when they can live out their strengths and values for the good of their community (Schnitker et al. 2019b). Athletics are also morally forming and can cultivate virtues and vices. Participation in both athletics and religion can provide people with communities, embodied ritualistic practices, and values that can influence the cultivation of virtues in people. The question central to the present study is whether sports cultivate virtues in the people who play them and what role intrinsic religiosity plays in this process.

1.2. Mixed Findings of Sport's Effect on Virtue Development

Researchers must continue to examine virtue development in athletic contexts because findings on sport's effect on morality are mixed. What follows is a review of empirical findings on the impact of athletic participation on morality.

1.2.1. Negative Effects of Sport

Early empirical research in athletic contexts focused on moral reasoning as an outcome. For example, one of the first studies to assess morality in athletes found that college non-athletes were significantly more mature in moral reasoning than college basketball players (interestingly, this effect did not replicate in a sample of swimmers or high school athletes; Bredemeier and Shields 1986). Similarly, Division I basketball players scored lower on moral judgment than non-athlete college students (Hall 1986). Moreover, another study found that high school team sport athletes scored lower on moral reasoning than non-athletes (Beller and Stoll 1995).

Athletes have also scored lower than non-athletes on other moral measures. For example, participation at higher competitive levels for more time was associated with greater justification of rule-violating behavior (Silva 1983). Assessing empathy as an outcome, another study found that youth were less sensitive to others the more years

they spent in baseball (Kalliopuska 1987). In a multilevel study of after-school activities and youth outcomes, sport participation was associated with higher average delinquency scores and increased substance use (both average scores and growth over time; Fauth et al. 2007). Compared with non-athletes, athletes have been found to consume more alcohol and engage in more adverse alcohol-related behaviors (Barber et al. 2001; Leichliter et al. 1998). In another study, involvement in high school sports was associated with higher irritability and aggressiveness and lower values of self-control and independence (Rees 1990).

Research findings also suggest that sport participation has mixed associations with sociomoral values. Collegiate student-athletes reported more prosocial behavior toward teammates yet more antisocial behavior toward opponents (effects partially mediated by moral disengagement and ego orientation; Kavussanu et al. 2013). Similarly, non-athletes scored significantly higher on a moral character index, but team-sport athletes scored higher on a social character index (Rudd and Stoll 2004). These findings suggest that sport can—but does not always—negatively affect moral and virtue development.[2]

1.2.2. Positive Effects of Sport

In contrast, cross-sectional, longitudinal, and quasi-experimental evidence suggests that athletic participation can promote the cultivation of certain virtues. One study found that college athletes were higher in trait hope than non-athletes (Cury et al. 1997). Much of the empirical research demonstrating sport's potential for positive character development comes from samples of runners. For example, higher self-report hope scores significantly predicted positive academic and athletic achievement outcomes in cross-country and track athletes, above and beyond self-worth and state measures (Cury et al. 1997).

Other evidence provides support for sport-specific virtue interventions and assessment. For example, a 90-min gratitude intervention for NCAA Division I student-athletes revealed significant increases in state gratitude, sport satisfaction, and social support and significant decreases in self-reported psychological distress and burnout (Gabana et al. 2019). Moreover, two studies (one U.S. sample and one Taiwanese sample) found evidence that sport-specific gratitude accounted for increased explained variance in athlete burnout and team satisfaction when controlling for trait gratitude (Chen and Chang 2017).

Findings on sport participation's effect on moral formation show the importance of various moderators, such as type of sport (Ford 2007; Rudd and Stoll 2004; Priest et al. 1999), level of competition (Doty and Lumpkin 2010; Priest et al. 1999), and gender (Beller and Stoll 1995; Doty and Lumpkin 2010; Leichliter et al. 1998; Priest et al. 1999; Rudd and Stoll 2004; and Silva 1983). Extant empirical findings suggest that sport can cultivate particular virtues, but only under the right conditions (Bredemeier and Shields 2006; Schnitker et al. 2020c).

1.3. Performance Virtues in Sport: Courage and Patience

The present research assesses two virtues relevant to sport: *courage* and *patience*. Courage and patience are considered performance virtues because they are character strengths needed to achieve human excellence in a variety of performance domains (e.g., school, work, and sport; Baehr 2017; Davidson 2004). Courage and patience are key character strengths for athletic contexts because they emphasize goal pursuit and emotion regulation. Empirical and theoretical research also suggests that courage and patience work in tandem, counterbalancing each other's vices of excess and deficiency (Callan 1993; Pianalto 2016; Ratchford et al. 2023a). Whereas courage enables the initiation of difficult tasks, patience facilitates sticking with challenges and waiting well (Gilbertson et al. 2019; Ratchford et al. 2023a).

1.3.1. Courage in Sport

Courage is willingly and knowingly acting despite risk (and often fear) for a worthwhile reason (Rate 2010). Courage enables people to pursue meaningful goals in everyday life, thus helping people to thrive when doing so is challenging or risky (Bounds et al. forthcoming). Indeed, one experiment found that encouraging people to "get outside their

comfort zone" increased life satisfaction (Russo-Netzer and Cohen 2022). Although courage is relevant for extreme physical feats (e.g., running six marathons in six weeks; Brito 2021), courage is also relevant for overcoming personal social or psychological challenges (e.g., having a vulnerable conversation with a coach; Pury et al. 2007). Sport represents a personally meaningful context for its participants, making athletic goals worthy of courageous striving (Corlett 1996). Moreover, sport requires deliberate practice that involves moving outside one's comfort zone (e.g., Duckworth et al. 2011). Courage is relevant to sport when fear of failure and risk of shame are great, but the competitor tries their very best despite the possibility of failing. The greatest fear an athlete faces is usually not physical, rather feelings of worthlessness after defeat or error. Some research has assessed sport-specific courage (Konter and Ng 2012), but more research is needed to examine courage in athletic contexts.

1.3.2. Patience in Sport

Patience is the ability to remain calm in the face of waiting, adversity, or suffering (Schnitker 2012). Patience is a key character strength in sport because of its relevance in long-term goal pursuit and connection to a higher purpose. A multilevel study of student goals found that patience was positively related to effort, meaning, and satisfaction in goal pursuit; moreover, people tended to enact more patience in pursuit of personally meaningful goals and were willing to enact greater effort while remaining patient in pursuit of meaningful goals (Thomas and Schnitker 2017). Patience is also a key character strength in sport because of its usefulness in coping with adversity and difficulty. Sport provides ample opportunities to suffer: the disappointment of defeat, difficult team dynamics, the discomfort of growth, nerves before a crucial competition, and injury (Schnitker et al. 2020a). More research is needed regarding the many ways patience may aid in enduring sport-specific challenges and the ways suffering in sport cultivates patience.

1.4. Identity in Sport: Contingent Self-Worth

Virtues not only involve adaptive habits, goals, and schemas but also the connection of these habits to an identity that values something beyond the self (Schnitker et al. 2019b). Given the identity component of virtues, it is important to assess how people are constructing their identity, which includes understanding where they find their worth and value. Thus, in addition to assessing courage and patience, the present research assesses two domains of self-worth contingency: *others' approval* (i.e., the extent to which people base their self-esteem on other people's approval) and *morality* (i.e., the extent to which people base their self-esteem on their own virtuousness). Contingent self-worth refers to self-esteem that fluctuates based on perceived failure and success in personal domains of contingency (i.e., areas of life that matter deeply to a person's sense of self; Crocker and Wolfe 2001). For athletes, sport performance is a relevant domain that can be healthy for self-esteem, but it can also consume an athlete's sense of self and limit options for other sources of identity (i.e., identity foreclosure; Brewer and Petitpas 2017).

Many athletes learn developmentally to use sport to earn approval (White and Bounds 2022). Sport culture can send messages that winning is everything and must be achieved at all costs, shaping competitor identity in the process (Careless and Douglas 2013; Rees et al. 2015). Sport culture can promote positive deviance and over-conformity to athletic norms such that athletes not only strive to be hard-working and competitive winners but the hardest-working, most competitive, winningest players (Hughes and Coakley 1991), sometimes to the detriment of their own well-being (Sinden 2013). Indeed, self-worth contingent on sport performance and others' approval is inversely related to well-being. A latent profile analysis in a sample of elite athletes found that athletes with a performance-based narrative identity (high perfectionism, fear of failure, and contingent self-worth) demonstrated the highest levels of psychological disruptions, whereas a purpose-based narrative identity (high purpose, global self-worth, positive view of self after sport) was associated with the highest level of psychological well-being (Houltberg et al. 2018). Another study showed that athletes with high self-esteem based on respect and love for themselves

demonstrated positive patterns of perfectionism, whereas athletes who have a self-esteem that is dependent on competence demonstrated maladaptive perfectionism (Koivula et al. 2002). Fear of failure (Conroy et al. 2002; Sagar et al. 2007), perfectionism (Sagar and Stoeber 2009), and performance-based depression (Hammond et al. 2013) are common among athletes, especially those who base their self-worth on earning approval via athletic success.

Self-worth contingencies also have predictive associations with virtues (Bounds et al. 2023; Crocker 2002). In one study of distance runners, moral self-worth positively predicted initiatory and inhibitory self-control, and competition self-worth inversely predicted initiatory and inhibitory self-control (Shubert et al. 2020). Another study found that high ego-oriented athletes were more inclined to approve of aggressive behaviors than those with lower ego orientation, and high task-orientated athletes had higher sportsmanship levels compared with low task-oriented athletes (Dunn and Dunn 1999). Self-worth contingencies are predictive of well-being and moral outcomes and are highly relevant to sport because of sport culture's emphasis on victory and earning applause.

Religious Identity in Sport

A religion, when internalized, can offer athletes a superordinate identity (e.g., Null 2008), which can affect contingencies of self-worth and virtues. One study found that collegiate athletes self-reported greater levels of religious identity than non-athletes (Allen et al. 2022), suggesting that athletes embrace their religious identity more than non-athletes. In a sample of elite athletes, high levels of religiousness were related to high levels of self-worth, which then related to lower levels of shame and greater comfort when reflecting on a disappointing performance (Houltberg et al. 2017). Furthermore, that same study found that religiousness and high levels of self-worth positively related to adaptive views of competition. Qualitative interviews from adolescents and emerging adults training to raise money for a faith-based charity revealed identity work (i.e., understanding limitations, reflecting on self-growth) and reflection of purpose (i.e., self-focused, others-focused, God-focused) throughout training (Terrell et al. 2021). Thus, research suggests religion can provide athletes with a new source of identity.

Likewise, research supports that virtue development in sport is enhanced by incorporating religiosity into motivations and identity. Patience and courage, like other virtues, are often rooted in self-transcendent motivations that allow people to withstand challenges by regulating the emotions evoked by these challenges to still engage in the right action (Ratchford et al. Forthcoming). Religion and spirituality can provide people with self-transcendent motivations that help people face and reframe challenges in sport. For example, in a study of adolescent and emerging adults training for a marathon to fundraise for a faith-based charity, baseline transcendent (i.e., spiritual, prosocial) motivations positively related to baseline patience, and changes in transcendent motivations positively correlated with changes in patience (Schnitker et al. 2020c). Furthermore, another study of elite athletes showed that intrinsic religiousness was indirectly related to higher patience through meaning-making and cognitive reappraisal (Schnitker et al. 2020a). Such effects have been replicated with other virtues besides patience; the internalization of religion during training was associated with higher post-race generosity for long-distance charity runners (Schnitker et al. 2020b). Goal pursuit researchers have found that people tend to engage more courage in pursuit of generativity and spiritual transcendence goals and less courage in pursuit of health and achievement goals (Ratchford et al. 2023a), further magnifying the importance of self-transcendent goals, which religion is well-suited to provide.

However, certain forms of religiosity can also morph into another sphere of perfectionistic striving for competitors. In a previously mentioned study of elite athletes, viewing God as perfectionistic related to shame and feelings of anger towards God when reflecting on a disappointing performance (Houltberg et al. 2017). Moreover, that same study found that viewing God as perfectionistic coupled with low levels of self-worth related to maladaptive views of competition. A different study found that a view of the divine as perfectionistic and critical was indirectly related to higher anxiety through self-worth

contingent on performance and fear of failure (Schnitker et al. 2020a). More research is needed to understand how religiosity affects self-worth in athletic populations.

1.5. The Present Study

The purpose of the present study is to examine whether athletic participation differentially influences the virtues of courage and patience depending on intrinsic religiosity. We hypothesize:

H1: *Religiosity will moderate the effects of athletic participation on self-reported virtues (assessed both as traits and characteristic ways of pursuing goals), such that athletic participation will be related to higher virtue when participants are more religious.*

We are assessing virtues as traits and characteristic ways of pursuing goals because previous research suggests goal-based virtue measurement is more sensitive to uncovering relations with contextual factors, like religiosity (Schnitker et al. 2019a). Goal-based assessment is especially useful for performance virtues, like courage and patience, employed in performance domains (e.g., sport).

Furthermore, our conceptualization of virtue highlights the importance of identity, so we examine self-worth contingencies as a second outcome, hypothesizing:

H2: *Religiosity will moderate the effects of athletic participation on approval and moral self-worth contingencies, such that athletic participation will be related to higher moral self-worth and lower approval self-worth when participants are more religious.*

Study hypotheses, independent variables, dependent variables, and analytic plan were preregistered (https://osf.io/hmazp), and all measure items for this study can be found in the Supplemental Materials (SM).

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants (N = 1930) were college students who attend religious institutions or are involved in Christian study centers (i.e., secular university adjacent religious organizations for students that provide intellectual engagement with the Christian tradition; see Hansen 2020) in the United States. Participant demographic information can be found in Table 1. There were no differences between athletes and non-athletes on year in school or religious identity, but there were significant gender (athletes were more likely to be male) and ethnic differences (non-athletes were less likely to be white; see the online Supplemental Materials [OSM] for chi-square values).

Table 1. Participant demographic information.

	Athlete (n = 415)		**Non-Athlete (n = 1515)**		**Total (N = 1930)**	
	n	**%**	***n***	**%**	***n***	**%**
Gender						
Male	183	44.2	430	28.5	613	31.8
Female	230	55.6	1058	70.1	1289	67
Intersex	0	0	2	0.1	2	0.1
Other	1	0.2	20	1.4	21	1.1
Year in School						
Freshman	114	27.5	460	30.4	739	30.5
Sophomore	99	23.9	309	20.5	520	21.5
Junior	120	29	448	29.6	681	28.2
Senior	61	14.7	211	14	343	14.2
Graduate Student	16	3.9	68	4.5	109	4.5
None of the above	1	0.2	5	0.3	10	0.4
Alum	3	0.7	10	0.7	17	0.7

Table 1. *Cont.*

	Athlete (n = 415)		Non-Athlete (n = 1515)		Total (N = 1930)	
	n	**%**	***n***	**%**	***n***	**%**
Religious Affiliation						
Protestant Christian	203	49.0	764	50.6	968	50.3
Catholic Christian	125	30.2	411	27.2	536	27.8
Buddhist	2	0.5	12	0.8	14	0.7
Hindu	4	1	21	1.4	25	1.3
Jewish	3	0.7	5	0.3	8	0.4
Muslim	0	0	16	1.1	16	0.8
None	14	3.4	69	4.6	83	4.3
Atheist	10	2.4	40	2.6	50	2.6
Agnostic	23	5.6	65	4.3	88	4.6
Other	30	7.2	107	7.1	137	7.1
Ethnicity						
African American/Black	6	1.4	60	4	66	3.4
Asian/Pacific Islander	44	10.6	236	15.6	280	14.6
Hispanic	29	7	107	7.1	136	7.1
Native American	0	0	6	0.4	6	.3
Caucasian/White	332	80.2	1068	70.8	1401	72.8
Other	3	0.7	32	2.1	35	1.8

Of the participants, 22% (n = 415) compete in an intercollegiate varsity sport in the United States. Of the participants who indicated intercollegiate athletic participation, 31% indicated competing in either football or basketball, 84% indicated competing in a different sport other than football or basketball, and 15% indicated competing in both football or basketball *and* another sport. Regarding NCAA Division, 72% were Division I athletes, 27% were Division III athletes, and 1% were unknown.

2.2. Procedure

Ethical approval was attained from Baylor University's Institutional Review Board. Participants were recruited via institutional emails, emails from study centers, on-campus events, or physical flyers posted around campus. Participants were compensated a $20 Amazon gift card for completing a 45–60-min Qualtrics survey online. Each institution and center also conducted a randomized drawing for five students with prizes of one $250 Amazon gift card and four $50 Amazon gift cards. The data from the present study come from a larger longitudinal study on faith and character (https://osf.io/h2rqp); therefore, in addition to the present study's measures, participants also completed other self-report virtue and religiousness measures.

2.3. Measures

Full measures information can be found in the OSM.

2.3.1. Athletic Participation

Two items from the *Your First Year College Survey* (Higher Education Research Institute 2018) were used to measure intercollegiate athletic participation. Participants were instructed to indicate whether the following two statements were true of them: "Participated in intercollegiate football or basketball" and "Participated in another intercollegiate sport". The two items were summed to create a single dichotomous variable (1 = athlete, 0 = non-athlete). For participants who indicated involvement for both items, they were given a score of 1 and not 2 in order to create a dichotomous grouping variable.

2.3.2. Trait Measures

Trait Courage. The six-item Courage Measure (CM; Howard and Alipour 2014) was used. Responses ranged from 1 (*never*) to 7 (*always*). Internal consistency was good (ω = .87).

Trait Patience. The 11-item 3-Factor Patience Questionnaire (3-FPQ; Schnitker 2012) was used to assess three dimensions of patience in addition to total trait patience: *Interpersonal*, *Life Hardships*, and *Daily Hassles*. Responses ranged from 1 (*not like me at all*) to 5 (*very much like me*). Internal consistency across subscales and for a total patience score was somewhat inadequate to good (all ω range from .68 to .80).

Contingencies of Self-Worth. Ten items from the Contingencies of Self-Worth Scale (CSWS; Crocker et al. 2003) were used to assess two different domains of contingent self-worth: *Others' Approval* (i.e., approval self-worth) and *Virtue* (i.e., moral self-worth). Responses ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Internal consistency across subscales was good (all ω > .83).

Intrinsic Religiosity. Three items from the Duke Religion Index (DUREL; Koenig and Büssing 2010) were used to assess intrinsic religiosity. Responses ranged from 1 (*definitely not true of me*) to 5 (*definitely true of me*). Internal consistency was good (ω = .91).

2.3.3. Goal-Based Measures

We used goals-based measurement to assess how much courage and patience participants enacted in pursuit of their goals (Ratchford et al. 2023a). Participants were asked to identify three goals that they planned to pursue that month (e.g., "Earn a 3.5 GPA" or "Be a good teammate").

Goal Courage. Participants rated each goal on five items to assess how much courage they enact in pursuit of their three goals (e.g., "I am courageous in pursuit of this goal: 'Earn a 3.5 GPA'" or "I can overcome my anxiety in pursuit of this goal: 'Be a good teammate'"). Goals are rated zero to one hundred. To create a total goal courage score, each goal is averaged across the five courage items, and then the three goals' courage scores are averaged to create a goal courage composite variable. Internal consistency was good (ω = .86).

Goal Patience. Participants rated each goal on six items to assess how much patience they enact in pursuit of their three goals (e.g., "I remain calm as I pursue the goal: 'Earn a 3.5 GPA'" or "I am patient in pursuit of the goal: 'Be a good teammate'"). Goals are rated zero to one hundred. To create a total goal patience score, each goal is averaged across the six patience items, and then the three goals' patience scores are averaged to create a goal patience composite variable. Internal consistency was good (ω = .90).

3. Results

Analyses were performed with SPSS (version 28). Descriptive information by athletic participation can be found in Table 2, and bivariate correlations can be found in Table 3. Preliminary results indicated that intercollegiate participation was positively associated with trait courage ($r(1928) = .09$, $p < .001$) and negatively associated with approval contingent self-worth ($r(1922) = -.05$, $p = .026$). Furthermore, athletic participation approached a significant positive association with goal patience ($r(1923) = .04$, $p = .051$) and approached a significant negative association with daily hassles patience ($r(1922) = -.04$, $p = .067$).

Next, we tested our hypotheses to examine intrinsic religiosity as a moderator of the effect of athletic participation on virtues and self-worth. Moderated regression analyses were performed with the PROCESS macro package (Hayes 2022) in SPSS. Virtue and self-worth outcomes were regressed onto athletic participation, intrinsic religiosity, gender, and the athlete x religiousness interaction. Gender was controlled as a covariate. PROCESS syntax was used to mean-center continuous independent variables (i.e., religiosity) prior to analysis for ease of interpretation; categorical variables (i.e., athlete status, gender) were not mean-centered. Results for all moderation models can be found in Table 4. Supplementary analyses can be found in the OSM.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics by athletic participation.

Athletic Status	Religiosity	Trait Courage	Goal Courage	Total Trait Patience	Inter-personal Patience	Life Hardships Patience	Daily Hassles Patience	Goal Patience	CSW-Approval	CSW-Moral
Non										
M(*SD*)	3.55(1.27)	4.40(1.02)	61.00(16.14)	3.47(0.60)	3.57(0.70)	3.30(0.82)	3.46(0.86)	61.38(15.64)	4.30(1.28)	5.22(1.05)
Athlete										
M(*SD*)	3.57(1.26)	4.62(0.98)	62.25(17.39)	3.45(0.60)	3.56(0.69)	3.35(0.81)	3.38(0.91)	63.06(15.19)	4.15(1.25)	5.21(1.02)
Total										
M(*SD*)	3.56(1.27)	4.45(1.02)	61.28(16.42)	3.46(0.60)	3.56(0.70)	3.31(0.82)	3.45(0.87)	61.74(15.55)	4.27(1.28)	5.22(1.04)

Note. CSW = Contingent Self-Worth.

Table 3. Bivariate correlations and measures reliability.

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.
1. Athletic Participation	-										
2. Religiosity	.01	-									
3. Trait Courage	.09 **	.12 **	-								
4. Goal Courage	.03	.22 **	.33 **	-							
5. Trait Patience	−.01	.07 **	.21 **	.25 **	-						
6. Interpersonal Patience	−.01	.06 **	.15 **	.23 **	.85 **	-					
7. Life Hardships Patience	.02	.07 **	.29 **	.23 **	.73 **	.47 **	-				
8. Daily Hassles Patience	−.04 †	.02	.06 *	.10 **	.70 **	.38 **	.28 **	-			
9. Goal Patience	.04 †	.10 **	.30 **	.68 **	.38 **	.33 **	.38 **	.17 **	-		
10. CSW-Approval	−.05 *	−.03	−.28 **	−.26 **	−.14 **	−.08 **	−.21 **	−.06 **	−.33 **	-	
11. CSW-Moral	.00	.24	.12 **	.10 **	.11 **	.13 **	.07 **	.04	.05 *	.10 **	-
Omegas	-	.91	.87	.86	.80	.77	.76	.68	.90	.83	.84

Note. CSW = Contingent Self-Worth. ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, † $p < .07$.

Table 4. Moderation models for each outcome.

	B								
	Trait Courage	Goal Courage	Trait Patience	Life Hardships Patience	Inter-personal Patience	Daily Hassles Patience	Goal Patience	CSW-Approval	CSW-Virtue
Athletic Participation	0.16 **	0.74	−0.04	0.01	−0.03	−0.10 *	0.78	−0.08	−0.02
Religiosity	0.10 **	2.35 **	0.03 *	0.04 *	0.03 *	0.01	0.88 **	0.01	0.21 **
Athl*Rel	−0.04	1.88 **	0.02	0.01	0.02	0.01	0.85	−0.15 **	−0.09 *
Gender	−0.32 **	−2.38 **	−0.12 **	−0.20 **	−0.10 **	−0.07	−4.85 **	0.43 **	−0.04
Model *F*	24.21 **	28.91 **	7.15 **	9.78 **	4.36 **	2.12	17.97 **	17.21 **	30.00 **
Model R^2	.048	.057	.015	.020	.010	.00	.036	.035	.059

Note. Athl*Rel = the interaction term, CSW = Contingent Self-Worth. ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.

Hypothesis 1: *Religiosity as a moderator of virtue.*

To test Hypothesis 1, trait courage, goal courage, trait patience, and goal patience were regressed onto athletic participation, intrinsic religiosity, the athlete x religiosity interaction, and gender in separate models. Although there was a significant association whereby athletes scored higher in trait courage, religiosity was not a significant moderator for trait courage. There were no main effects of athlete status on trait patience or goal patience, and there were no significant interactions for patience outcomes.

Religiosity significantly moderated the effect of athletic participation on goal courage, $F(4, 1916) = 28.91$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .057$. The model revealed a main effect of religiosity ($t(1917) = 7.26$, $p < .001$, $B = 2.35$), such that religiousness was positively associated with goal courage. There was no main effect of athlete status. There was a main effect of gender

($t(1917) = -3.25$, $p < .01$, $B = -2.38$) such that males reported greater goal courage. The interaction was significant ($t(1917) = 2.68$, $p < .01$, $B = 1.88$); higher levels of religiosity were associated with higher levels of goal courage for athletes compared to non-athletes (see Figure 1[3]). Simple-slope tests examining the mean and one standard deviation above and below the mean of religiosity revealed a significant positive association between athlete status and goal courage at high levels of religiosity ($t(1917) = 2.49$, $p < .05$, $B = 3.13$), but no significant associations at average or low levels of religiosity ($ts < |1.5|$). Simple-slope tests comparing athletes and non-athletes revealed a significant effect for non-athletes ($t(1917) = 7.26$, $p < .001$, $B = 2.35$) but a stronger effect for athletes ($t(1917) = 6.80$, $p < .001$, $B = 4.23$).

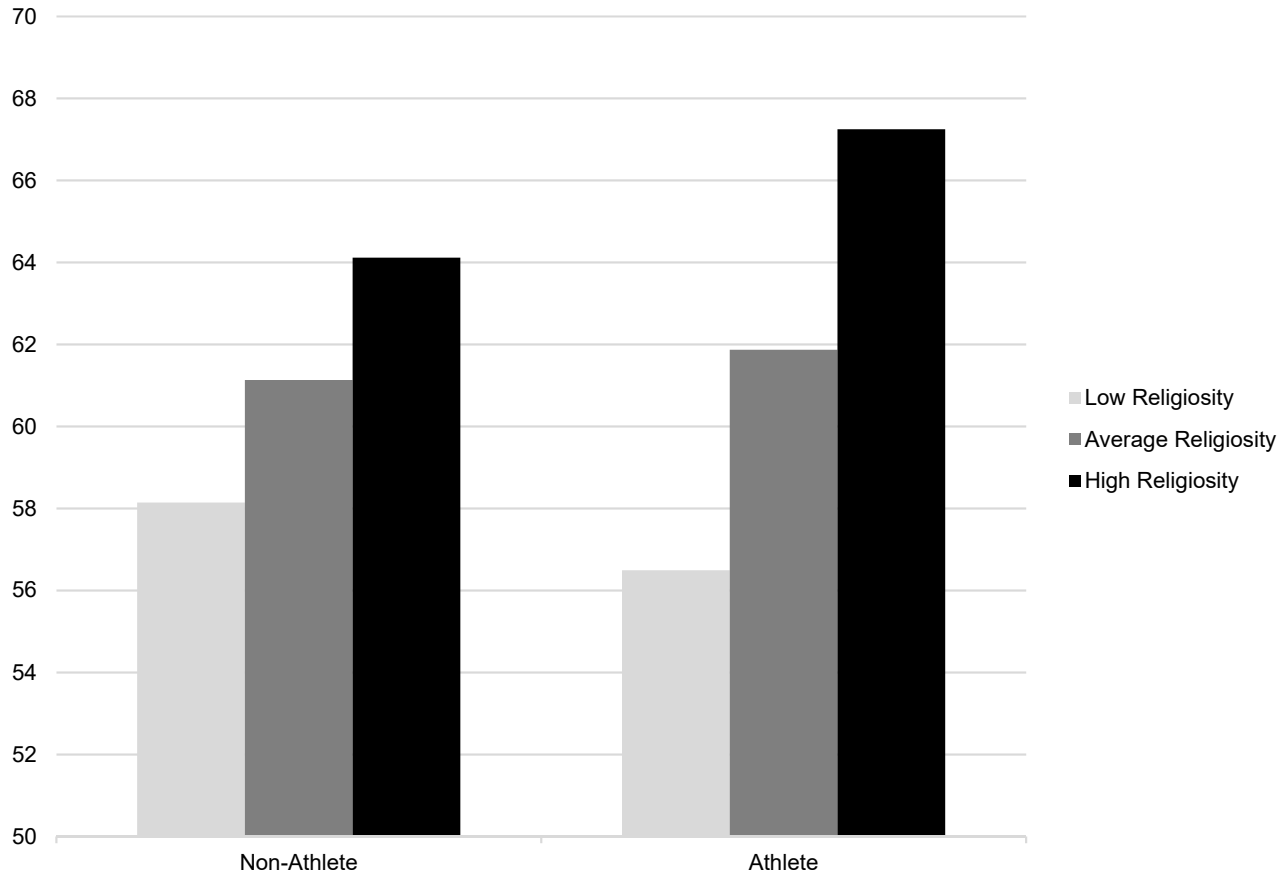

Figure 1. Religiosity moderates sport's effect on goal courage.

Hypothesis 2: *Religiosity as a moderator of self-worth.*

To test Hypothesis 2, approval and moral self-worth were regressed onto athletic participation, intrinsic religiosity, the athlete x religiosity interaction, and gender in separate models. Results found that religiosity was a significant moderator for both approval and moral self-worth.

3.1. Approval Self-Worth

Religiosity significantly moderated athletic participation on approval contingent self-worth, $F(4, 1916) = 17.21$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .035$. The model revealed a main effect of gender ($t(1917) = 7.39$, $p < .001$, $B = 0.43$) such that females and other gender identities had higher approval contingent self-worth. There was no main effect of religiosity or athletic participation. The interaction was significant ($t(1917) = -2.73$, $p < .01$, $B = -0.15$); higher levels of religiosity were associated with lower levels of approval self-worth for athletes compared to non-athletes (see Figure 2). Simple-slope tests examining the mean and one

standard deviation above and below the mean of religiosity revealed a significant negative association between athlete status and approval self-worth at high levels of religiosity ($t(1917) = -2.77$, $p < .01$, $B = -0.27$), but no significant associations at average or low levels of religiosity ($ts < |1.2|$). Simple-slope tests comparing athletes and non-athletes revealed a significant effect for athletes ($t(1917) = -2.88$, $p < .01$, $B = -0.14$) but no effect for non-athletes ($t < 0.40$).

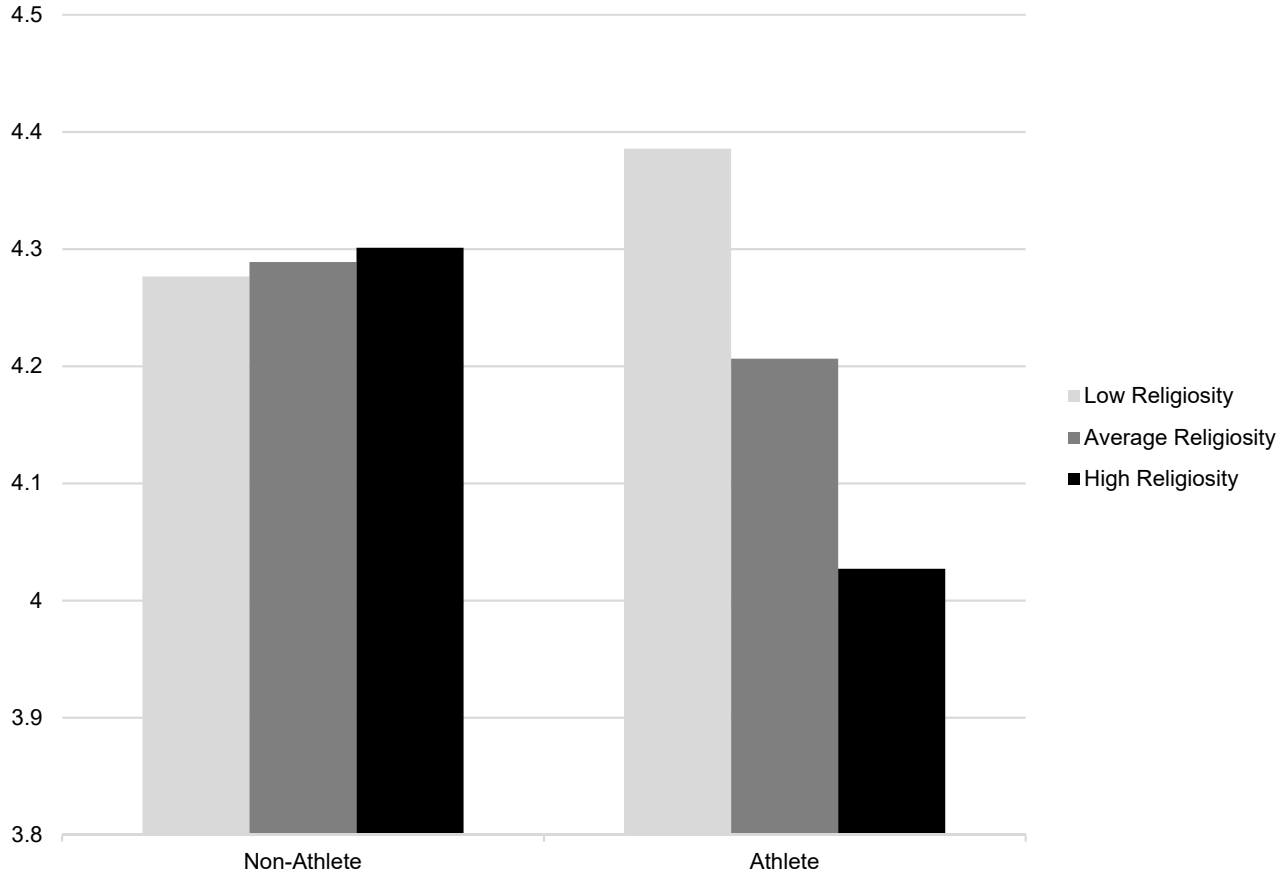

Figure 2. Religiosity moderates sport's effect on approval self-worth.

3.2. Moral Self-Worth

Religiosity significantly moderated athlete status on moral contingent self-worth, $F(4, 1916) = 30.00$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .059$. The model revealed a main effect of religiosity ($t(1917) = 10.37$, $p < .001$, $B = 0.21$), such that religiosity was positively associated with moral contingent self-worth. There was no main effect of athletic participation or gender. The interaction was significant ($t(1917) = -2.00$, $p < .05$, $B = -0.09$); higher levels of religiosity were associated with lower levels of moral self-worth for athletes compared to non-athletes (see Figure 3). Simple-slope tests examining the mean and one standard deviation above and below the mean of religiosity were nonsignificant ($ts < |1.7|$) but grew closer to significance at higher levels of religiosity. Simple-slope tests comparing athletes and non-athletes revealed a significant effect for athletes ($t(1917) = 3.13$, $p < .01$, $B = 0.12$) and a stronger effect for non-athletes ($t(1917) = 10.37$, $p < .001$, $B = 0.21$).

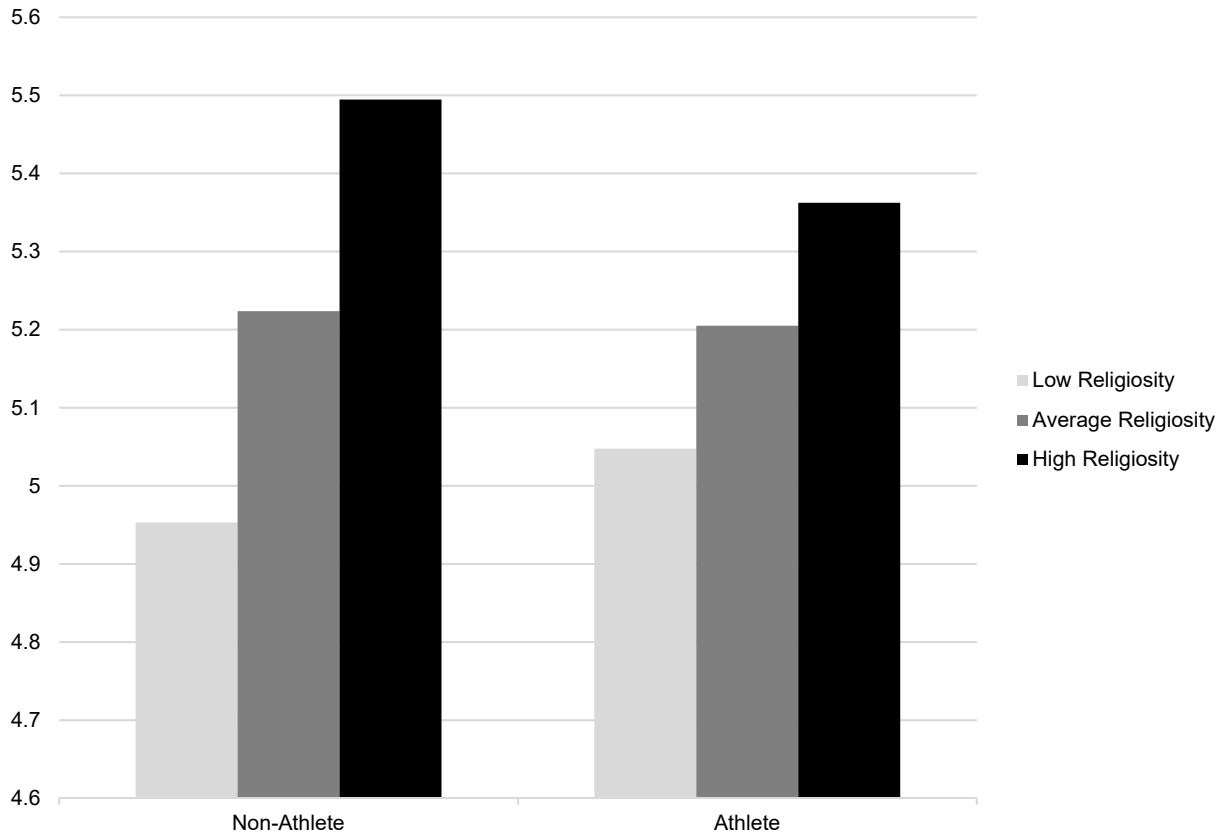

Figure 3. Religiosity moderates sport's effect on moral self-worth.

4. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine whether intrinsic religiosity moderated the effect of athletic participation on self-reported virtue and self-worth outcomes. Contrary to predictions, religiosity did not significantly moderate trait courage, trait patience, or goal patience. Consistent with predictions, religiosity significantly moderated goal courage, approval self-worth, and moral self-worth.

4.1. Courage

Religious athletes tended to enact greater goal courage. Whereas intrinsic religiosity was positively associated with goal courage for non-athletes, the association was stronger for athletes. The more religious an athlete is, the more courage they enact in pursuit of their goals.

Recent findings suggest that people use greater courage in pursuit of spiritual goals and less courage in pursuit of achievement goals (Ratchford et al. 2023a). Sport may represent a domain of both achievement and spiritual strivings for religious athletes. It is possible that religious athletes sanctify their athletic goals (Lynn 2008), imbuing their everyday training and competition with transcendent significance (Ellis and Weir 2020; White 2018). Furthermore, religiosity and spirituality have also been identified as sources to help cope with the demands of elite sport (Vernacchia et al. 2000). Thus, it is possible that religious messages are particularly encouraging for athletes in high-performance contexts wherein challenging goal pursuit is salient.

Findings on goal courage diverge from past research that found non-athletes to have stronger character than athletes (Beller and Stoll 1995; Bredemeier and Shields 1986; Fauth et al. 2007; Hall 1986; Kalliopuska 1987; Rees 1990; Silva 1983). The present study did not find many differences between athletes and non-athletes. In contrast, the present research suggests that athletes may enact greater performance virtues in pursuit of their goals (e.g., Cury et al. 1997), especially when they have a religious orientation to life.

Moreover, it is worth highlighting the utility of both trait and goal-level virtue measures. Trait courage was significantly positively correlated with athletic involvement (regardless of religiosity), but goal courage was not. However, religiosity only moderated athletic involvement on goal courage and not trait courage. This finding suggests the utility of both trait and goal-based measurement, aligning with previous research suggesting goal-based measures are more sensitive to contextual factors like religiosity (Schnitker et al. 2019a).

4.2. Patience

Sport participation did not significantly affect trait or goal patience. Although athletic participation approached a significant positive correlation with goal patience, athletic participation also approached a significant negative association with daily hassles patience. It is probable that sport culture does not prioritize the character strength of patience, or it is possible that patience requires more time to develop. Although research shows that patience facilitates goal pursuit, coaches and athletes are socialized by a broader culture that does not prioritize patience; on the contrary, maintaining a view prevalent in Western cultures that patience may undermine performance (Harned 1997).

4.3. Self-Worth

Athletic participation is inversely correlated with approval self-worth. This finding is somewhat surprising given sport culture's emphasis on earning applause (Houltberg et al. 2018; Hughes and Coakley 1991; White and Bounds 2022). Furthermore, religiosity moderated approval self-worth such that religiosity did not influence levels of approval self-worth for non-athletes but did so significantly for athletes. The more religious athletes become, the less important other people's approval is for their sense of self.

It is possible that the combination of athletic participation and religiosity is beneficial for well-being and self-concept. Some have argued that sport can provide people with a meaning system in secular contexts (Sosis and Kiper 2022). However, for religious athletes, it is likely that sport provides basic needs such as competency and connectedness (Deci and Ryan 2012), and religion provides a meaning-making system (Park et al. 2013) and a sense of unconditional acceptance (Null 2008). Perhaps when religious athletes feel competent, coherent, and accepted, then they do not feel the need to perform to earn approval from other people. In this way, religiosity may free athletes from maladaptive performance tendencies.

Findings on approval self-worth are consonant with past research that has found that religiosity uniquely relates to self-worth in a way that positively impacts athlete well-being (Houltberg et al. 2017). Past findings suggest that religious athletes embrace their religious identity as primary (Allen et al. 2022). Furthermore, positive views of the divine have been found to increase virtue in athletes, whereas punitive views of the divine have been found to relate to contingent self-worth, fear of failure, and anxiety in athletes (Schnitker et al. 2020a). Therefore, in some contexts, religiosity boosts athletes' self-worth, freeing them from a need to prove worthiness and earn approval.

Religiosity also moderated moral self-worth such that religiosity positively influenced moral self-worth greater for non-athletes than athletes. Whereas religiosity was positively associated with moral self-worth contingency for athletes, the association was stronger for non-athletes. It is probable that because sport provides athletes with a strong source of identity (Brewer and Petitpas 2017; Careless and Douglas 2013), morality is of less importance to an athlete's sense of self.

Findings on moral self-worth somewhat align with past studies comparing athletes and non-athletes on moral reasoning. Past findings found that non-athletes tended to score higher on moral reasoning than athletes (Beller and Stoll 1995; Bredemeier and Shields 1986; Hall 1986). Although moral reasoning and moral contingent self-worth are discriminant, they are likely to relate positively.

4.4. Applications for Practitioners

We offer three suggestions for practitioners who seek to cultivate virtues in athletes. First, make purpose salient. Because virtues require a self-transcendent perspective, leaders should regularly remind athletes of their greater purpose. For example, ask each athlete to write a "why statement," delineating why they compete, and ask for volunteers to share throughout the season/off-season. Hope College Women's Soccer designed training shirts in 2016 with "WHY" printed upside down on the front so that when players looked down, they were reminded to consider why they play (see Figure 4). As our results on approval self-worth show, for religious athletes, reflecting on how their faith affects their purpose can detach self-worth from external domains such as others' approval.

Figure 4. Example of making purpose salient in athletic contexts.

Second, results suggest that athletic involvement is more likely to cultivate courage than patience. To avoid recklessness (courage's vice of excess), practitioners should intentionally cultivate patience alongside courage. Recent research has found that patience and courage can work in tandem to counterbalance each other's vices of excess and deficiency (Ratchford et al. 2023a). Avoiding excess, such as recklessness, is crucial in a sport culture where athletes are encouraged to overconform, even to their own detriment of injury (Hughes and Coakley 1991; Sinden 2013).

Third, practitioners should model and reference virtues with their leadership. Practitioners can use positive reinforcement by naming virtues when seen or needed. For instance, coaches could celebrate an injured athlete's patience during rehabilitation or remind athletes to use courage to overcome their nerves before an important competition. Sport leaders should also remind athletes of their inherent value and dignity regardless of their performance (Houltberg et al. 2017). Special care must be taken to avoid treating virtuousness as another sphere of perfectionistic striving and earning (Null 2008, 2016). Athletes are already hyper-focused on performance (Hughes and Coakley 1991) and should not be encouraged to cultivate strong character as another arena of performance. Our data con-

firm that virtue development in sport should happen in accordance with self-transcendent motivations rather than performance motivations.

4.5. Limitations and Future Directions

Limitations of this study include a cross-sectional design, thus limiting inferences about sport's causal association with virtue. This study lacks robust measurement of type of sport, which does not allow comparison of effects across types of sports on virtue (e.g., team versus individual). Finally, this study also lacks measurement of sport-contingent self-worth, relying on extant measures of contingent self-worth (i.e., approval, virtue; Crocker et al. 2003) that, although relevant, do not directly assess how important sport is to an athlete's identity.

We offer several suggestions for future directions of empirical research. First, it is important to highlight the importance of scholar-practitioner collaborations. Because both religion and sport are highly contextualized, researchers aiming to conduct research in these settings must engage practitioners throughout the research process to accurately understand the current sub-cultural distinctions and viable possibilities for change. Some scholars are already doing meaningful research in partnership with practitioners (e.g., Ettekal et al. 2017; Waller et al. 2016). Scholar-practitioner partnerships are especially effective for developing implementation-ready sport-specific virtue interventions that can be tested with experimental and quasi-experimental designs (e.g., Parker et al. Forthcoming).

Second, in addition to intervention studies, longitudinal studies are needed to examine changes in intrinsic religiousness and virtues over time (e.g., Priest et al. 1999). Studies have been conducted looking at virtue and transcendent motivation in sport (Schnitker et al. 2020c), but studies are needed in diverse sporting contexts and with goals-based virtues assessment.

Third, researchers should further systematically test mechanisms and conditions under which sport cultivates specific virtues. In this study, we examine internal factors of athletes (i.e., intrinsic religiosity) that influence the effects of sport on their character and self-worth. Future studies should examine external factors (e.g., coaching style) as well as how internal factors and external factors interact (e.g., how religious vs. non-religious athletes respond to different coaching styles or religious vs. non-religious coaches).

Last, researchers should continue examining specific domains of contingent self-worth (Bounds et al. 2023; Crocker et al. 2003, p. 906). Relevant domains in sports include parental approval, coach approval, fan opinion, mastery, and victory. Person-centered approaches that look at the various combinations of contingencies may be especially useful as they reveal the strengths and risks individual athletes bring to moral formation and well-being in sport based on their entire constellation of self-worth contingencies.

4.6. Conclusions

Intrinsic religiousness interacts with athletic contexts to increase goal courage and free athletes from a need to perform to earn approval. The example of Marci Jobson is illustrative of our results. Jobson (2021) reflects on how her faith helped her grapple with her identity and find the courage to face challenges while competing for the National Team:

> . . .my mind goes to a place of, I'm not good enough, I'm not strong enough, I can't do this. . .But that is the beauty of God's Word. Instantly, the ball at my feet, I could say, God help me, I need you, I'm afraid, I'm anxious, I want to invite you into this game here right now. . . And I could feel in those moments courage rise up in me, so that I could face a hard challenge. And I became brave.

Although Jobson has had an exceptional career, our data suggest that when it comes to the effects of her internalized faith on her virtues and self-worth, she is unexceptional. This study shows that religious college athletes are similar to Jobson: when they bring a strong religious faith to their competition, they are more courageous in pursuit of goals and less likely to base their self-worth on others' approval.

Supplementary Materials: The following supporting information can be downloaded at https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/rel14101223/s1, Study Measures, Table S1: Chi Square Tests for Demographic Differences between Athletes and Non-athletes, Table S2: One-Way MANOVA Statistics, Table S3: One-Way MANCOVA Statistics, Table S4: Two-Way MANOVA Statistics, Figure S1: Religiosity Moderates Sports' Effect on Goal Courage, Figure S2: Religiosity Moderates Sports' Effect on Approval Self-Worth, Figure S3: Religiosity Moderates Sports' Effect on Moral Self-Worth.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Institutional Review Board of Baylor University (protocol code 1873017-5, approval date 10 July 2022).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Data are available for open access at https://osf.io/7fv65/.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Notes

1 For more information about Marci Jobson, see https://www.warriorwaysoccer.com (accessed on 9 January 2023).

2 For a review comparing different types of sports on moral outcomes, see the OSM.

3 See the OSM for line graph versions of figures.

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