



*Journal of  
Religion & Society*  
Supplement Series

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The Kripke Center

Supplement 20 (2019)

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## Catholics and Sport in a Global Context

Edited by Patrick Kelly, S.J., Seattle University

### 6. Toward the Integral Development of Students in Canadian Catholic High School Athletics

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#### Abstract

This paper, based upon interviews and focus groups conducted with 15-year-old student-athletes at two Catholic high schools in Edmonton, Canada, explains how religion and spirituality supported students' integral development. Psychologically, religion and spirituality provided confidence, despite questions related to its placebo effect. Morally, students believed religion made them better people despite obvious tensions with sport. Socially, youth appreciated mentorship from coaches but grappled with the public place of religion in sport. Educational implications require intentional reflection on sport and improved institutional support toward the integration of a religious spirituality in these sport programs.

Key words: Catholic schools, student athlete, integral development, religion, spirituality

## **Introduction**

Sports have historically played an important role in the integral development of students in Catholic schools in North America; coaches and educational leaders often attempted to connect religious faith with the holistic growth of youth. In the nineteenth-century United States, numerous institutions of Catholic higher education – from St. John’s College to Santa Clara College – included sport and recreation in their weekly curriculum (Kelly: 51-55), and in time Catholic parishes and schools began sport leagues. Most famously, Chicago bishop Bernard J. Sheil founded the Catholic Youth Organization (CYO) as a “recreational, educational and religious program . . . [to] meet the physical, mental and spiritual needs of out-of-school Catholic boys and girls” (Kelly: 55). Many American and Canadian dioceses followed suit and established their own programming.

In Canada, two iconic priests, David Bauer and Anthol Murray, led sporting attempts to teach and mentor secondary and post-secondary students. Bauer, a talented ice hockey player, turned down professional opportunities to become a Basilian priest and the coach of a Memorial Cup championship team at St. Michael’s College School (Toronto) in 1961. He would go on to establish a national hockey team that represented the country internationally, and that played a less violent, more skillful style and enrolled these young men in post-secondary schooling (Dixon) – something nearly impossible to do at the time in Canada. The idea for Bauer’s national team was hatched with Anthol Murray, a bilingual priest who travelled west from central Canada and eventually established Notre Dame College in Wilcox, Saskatchewan. The school, educating at both the secondary and post-secondary levels, offered a classical liberal education mixed with Murray’s exuberance for sport and ecumenically-minded approach to faith (Gorman). After Murray’s passing in 1975, Bauer would lead the drafting of a new post-secondary education program at the college that drew from philosophy, English literature, and patristic thought.

Both Bauer and Murray used sports to influence lives beyond the hockey rink, mentoring young men toward higher ideals drawn from the Catholic faith and Greek antiquity. They were not merely concerned with physical abilities or tactical game plans, but also with the students’ psychological, social, moral, and spiritual development. Today Catholic schools’ sports programming cannot assume to develop character in students, running the risk of only paying lip service to the integral development of youth – a phenomenon that Canadian educator Ted Schmidt critically labels “Athletics” (Schmidt: 116-20). Similar to Bauer and Murray, who offered a model for training youth that was countercultural to the rugged ideals of Canadian ice hockey, how can sports programming today engage Catholic education’s focus on the integral human formation of student-athletes?

At least in theory, Catholic schools are meant to prioritize the integral development of students to provide an education that “encompasses social and ethical formation” alongside knowledge-content learning (Connell: 35). Neo-liberal views, explains Australian educator Marian de Souza, that focus on training as gaining external skills with an emphasis on efficiency are, by contrast, narrow-mindedly restricted to a “positivistic and reductionistic framework” (3). The Catholic intellectual tradition sees persons as responsible social agents, shaped according to their subjectivity and situation as much as from the content presented through instruction (Connell: 35). An education focused on the integral development of students,

claims Canadian educational philosopher Mario D'Souza, has the "enduring feature" of being based upon "the unity of the student, and is manifested in a variety of dimensions, including the religious, moral, social, intellectual and cultural dimensions" (214). Drawing from the work of Jacques Maritain, D'Souza explains that ideally there grows an internal and spiritual unity in each student (122) in which wisdom and insight are more important than factual knowledge (125), and in which education must "free the senses and integrate them into the totality of personhood" (126). This approach to education has moral and social implications, because real human unity is realized through people's understanding, love and care for others (129), which enables human solidarity despite differences between people.

According to D'Souza, this integral education must be founded upon the unity of the student – in which educators protect students' integrity and promote their on-going growth – and is encapsulated "in the command to love God and one's neighbor as oneself" (214). Unfortunately, an understanding of the education of the whole person is frequently "left to vague generalizations and tired platitudes" (140) that overlook, in particular, the Congregation for Catholic Education's understanding of Christian anthropology and social responsibilities amidst diversity and plurality (140). For instance, following Vatican II, this congregation declared: "The school must begin from the principle that its educational program is intentionally directed to the growth of the whole person" (2013: 30). Elsewhere, the congregation states that the "promotion of the human person is the goal of the Catholic school" since "all human values find their fulfilment and unity in Christ" (1998: 9). In placing the human person as central to this educational project, these schools are to focus "on the human person in his or her integral, transcendent, historical identity" (1998: 10). James Porath explains further that educating all aspects of the human person in Catholic schools includes providing a unified worldview across the curriculum (e.g., belief in the unity of body and spirit) by which a vision of the world and culture are inclusive of faith in a transcendent, yet immanent, God (232). Thus, D'Souza can conclude that church documents speak against over-intellectualizing education and view the student as "a knowing and relational being, whose freedom is realized in responsible judgements, decisions, and choices" (119). In all the school does, including its sporting programs, the principal concern should remain the integral development of the young person.

Authors writing about sport in Catholic schools emphasize the integral development of students, too. Richard McGrath implores coaches to shape students through values and character building because of their role as mentors and sport ministers to young athletes. Clark Power, a scholar in moral education and youth sport, led a study with student-athletes that revealed the value of social interactions with coaches who promoted character virtues instead of only performance virtues (Power and Seroczynski). Patrick Kelly's edited book includes a host of voices on the psychological, moral, social, and spiritual development of young athletes, along with theological reflection that grounds these approaches in a Catholic worldview. The above authors, similar to Bauer and Murray, emphasize the integral development of youth in Catholic educational institutions from both theoretical and practical perspectives.

The literature makes clear that Catholic schools must support the integral development of youth through sport: this is a fundamental tenet for all Catholic schooling activities. In particular, this paper focuses on the role religion and spirituality play in this integral development of youth in competitive sport. It asks the question: How do religion and

spirituality support students' psychological, moral, and social growth in the context of playing sports? This article acts as a capping paper for a qualitative, grounded theory research study of 15-year-old student athletes. Whereas three published, qualitative papers resulted – the first analyzed the diversity of religious spiritual practices of youth in sport (Hoven and Kuchera); the second described how youth navigated the intersection between religious beliefs and the competitive nature of sport (Hoven 2016); and the third paper re-characterized a sport psychology understanding of confidence by incorporating youth's reported use of religion in sport (Hoven 2017) – this current article presents major findings within the framework of the integral development of students so as to pinpoint implications for leaders in Canadian Catholic high schools.

Catholic schools in Canada have diverse student populations and teach non-Catholic and non-religiously affiliated students. Some youth volunteered and were accepted for this study despite having no religious affiliation (yet they did believe in a higher power). While I place priority on Catholicism in this paper, because most of the students were religiously affiliated and all attended a religiously affiliated school, I also use spirituality on occasion when writing about the religiously unaffiliated. What is discussed in this paper is how students' religion and spirituality was part of their integral development in sport. To be clear, I am not seeking to define a new form of spiritualism in sport and do not present religion as a subcategory under the umbrella term spirituality. Nor am I satisfied to avoid the term religion in favor of spirituality and its emphasis on connectedness and the "relational dimension of being" (de Souza: 526). However, because the use of religion and spirituality can be a positive, formative step in youth's overall well-being (Miller: 187; Heintzman: 77), it is valuable to examine how interviewed students thought about or experienced religion and spirituality in sport and how that related to their integral development.

### **Methodology and Background**

In 2013 and 2014, I conducted focus groups and individual face-to-face, qualitative, semi-structured audio-recorded interviews with 15-year-old student athletes to obtain the predominant views and practices of religion and spirituality in sport. Questions examined students' (a) perceptions of the value of sport; (b) awareness of the types of religious and spiritual practices in sport; (c) perceptions of the presence of moral standards and issues in sport; and (e) religious beliefs about God in the context of sport.

The study was approved by the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board and operational approval was obtained from the Edmonton Catholic Schools District (ECSD). Using purposeful sampling, high school students (seven male and six female) were recruited from two Edmonton Catholic high schools and participated in the study. Although formal religious involvement was not a requirement for participants, sampling from these publicly-funded Catholic schools increased the probability that these students had been exposed to concepts of religion and spirituality previously in their education, yet by no means does sampling at religious schools equate with fully engaged youth within their religious affiliations (Rymarz: 33). The interviewees played competitive team (e.g., basketball, volleyball, ice hockey, football, baseball, lacrosse) and individual sports (e.g., track and field, karate, swimming); they all played varsity sports (except for Players 2 and 3) in which they would sometimes face other Catholic school teams. They varied in religious background yet were predominantly Catholic

because of the schools' ethos and prominence of this religion in Canada: seven students identified themselves as Catholic (Players 1, 2, 4, 7, 8, 10, and 13), two as Christian (5 and 6), one as Muslim (9), and three as religious nones (3, 11, and 12). Level of religious practice varied but was higher than societal norms for this age (Bibby) as five participants (2, 4, 6, 7, and 9) reported attending religious services with some regularity. All students claimed to believe in God or a higher power, even if they were not religiously affiliated.<sup>1</sup>

### **Findings and Discussion**

Based upon data taken from the interviews and focus groups, this paper focuses on the influence of religion and spirituality in the integral development of student athletes and the broader implications of this for Catholic schools. The findings are divided into three sections that focus on how religion and spirituality influence student development psychologically, morally, and socially.

#### *Religion and Spirituality Influence Athletes Psychologically*

When speaking about religion and spirituality in their competitive sporting experiences, these young athletes explained how religious practices gave them confidence and calmness, despite some questioning if religiousness was simply a placebo or limited to luck. Player 4, who came from a practicing Catholic home, said that she appreciated how much team prayer gave her squad a boost of confidence on the court: "Last year we had a game against . . . the toughest team . . . [Team prayer] did help. It gave us a lot [confidence], it calmed us down, because we were all so scared to play these guys so we quickly gathered in the locker room, did a quick prayer." She also noted how she would make a small sign of the cross before taking foul shots in basketball: "When the pressure is on in the game, it is nice to remember that you are not alone." One very competitive track athlete, who also came from a family who attended Mass regularly, noted how private prayers aided her: "I have said a quick prayer, like 'Please help me do well in the race today,' or 'Please help me to not drop the baton or run out of my lane' . . . Sometimes when we are on edge we aren't as kind as we could be, perhaps spiritual stuff would keep us a little more calm" (Player 7). Other practices were named as ways to gain calmness or confidence. A practicing Christian (non-Catholic) and lacrosse player told this story about visualization and calling on a saint: "To calm down, I close my eyes and think about something better that someone else would do in that situation . . . My grandma taught me a lot about religion [and so] I think of what my grandma would do if she was playing this sport. Praying puts more confidence into us . . . Having a few more people, not in the present, but in our minds and hearts, praying for us. God or people who have passed away" (Player 5).

A hockey player who came from a practicing Catholic family echoed the idea that prayer gives a person a different vantage point from which to view a difficult situation in sport: "Prayer is another way to calm down and not get caught up in the moment . . . Prayer gives you a new perspective. I pray and hope everything is going to be alright" (Player 2). Player 10, whose family went to Mass sometimes, admitted that he did not always remember to make the sign of the cross and point upwards before the basketball tipoff; he said that he did it "because it reminds me that I am playing because of God . . . I believe God gave me a gift to

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<sup>1</sup> Further methodological details about the interviews and focus groups can be found in Hoven and Kuchera.

play basketball.” Recalling his belief in God and his perceived purpose drawn from this belief, he found strength and reassurance in this practice. While sport psychology names several other environmental and psychological factors that affect player confidence (Vealey: 44-47; Koehn, Pearce, and Morris: 645), the youth’s stories connected their sporting endeavors, existential concerns, and religious practices. The use of religion by the student-athletes increased mental confidence, which reflects findings from other studies (Czech and Bullet; Watson and Nesti), and thus helped youth integrate their existential reality (i.e., concerns about their future in sport, other fears, and relationships with others) with their belief in God (Hoven 2017). Player 4, a Catholic, noted that “Non-athletes look at [athletes performing rituals] and think that it is silly . . . But in your head, you know that it may not help me, but it feels better to do it.”

The above religious actions or rituals were functionally helpful for the athletes, but so too were pre-game performance rituals that were simply completed as a psychological strategy. One practicing Catholic, like many others, explained that “some of the things that I do are more of a strategy, a stretch, or me just getting into position than a [religious] ritual” (Player 7). These actions were not meant to be religious or spiritual, but more of a means for pre-game mental preparation (Vealey: 43). These could relieve psychological tensions while therapeutically increasing confidence and calmness. When asked why they completed religious or personal (i.e., superstitious) practices, students acknowledged limited impact on an actual game. From wearing lucky socks to entering the playing field in a ritualized manner, these actions were thought to have a strong psychological power beyond the comprehension of youth. Player 11 privately admitted that he did not want to mess with his personal rituals although they could not really affect his game; he noted that the “smart ones know that it is not the superstition that is improving their game.” In focus groups, students made fun of the idea that God would directly intervene in a sporting event, as they emphasized hard work as the primary reason for victory. They also acknowledged non-religious ritual actions were illogical, but kept performing them for their psychological benefits. There clearly was an uncomfortable dimension in their thinking regarding religious and personal rituals because these actions seemed illogical or at least unexplainable: while these actions increased confidence toward challenges experienced in sport and calmed connected existential questions, any real effect on their sport performance seemed unreasonable.

Finally, a word on the topic of luck and its enigmatic influence is necessary. Similar to students’ uncertainty regarding ritualized actions in sport, many viewed the influence of luck simply as a mental placebo (Player 11), drawing comparisons to something generalized as karma, equating it to randomness and focusing instead on fate (Player 7). As one student put it: “I like luck. I don’t know if it is real but I like it” (Player 7). For one focus group, it was imagined as a strange external force they could potentially influence through ritualized actions. Many thought that players make their own luck through hard work, reflecting a position where luck is a personal characteristic that one has some control over (Pritchard and Smith: 14). Luck, as they described it, was not only psychological but seemed to have some kind of external influence. Player 12, who was not religiously affiliated, stated: “You can’t do everything yourself, it’s not like you make your own luck. You just get lucky sometimes.” They accepted that not everything is under their control, which in turn translated into an acceptance of luck – either good or bad. Their perspective reflects the work of Jackson Lears, who argued that approaches which seek (a) to control luck or (b) to accept it as mere chance can overlap

or intermingle (7). It also reflects Denis Bekkering's insight that sportspeople can be blessed with luck – "a secularized form of grace" – that comes through an elite athlete's strict training and virtuous habits (64). This study's participants discussed the theme of luck with more ease than the theme of Christian grace, leading one to wonder if these young people better understood the former over the latter (Scholes and Sassower: 150). Furthermore, luck was reported as a positive influence for these youth, leading some to be thankful for what they have because life could have turned out worse. In the unpredictability of a sporting event, these students experienced a tide of luck, in which things flowed for or ebbed against them and their teams. Overall, students completed different religious and non-religious rituals for improved sporting performance amidst felt-existential threats in sport, but they psychologically remained uncertain about how these actions might actually make a difference in sport.

#### *Religion and Spirituality Influence Athletes Morally*

Morally, students spoke about religion making them better people in sport. These student athletes, like one practicing Christian, found that religion improved their moral resolve: "Religion makes me a better person . . . It doesn't distract me in sport, it makes me play stronger . . . I don't retaliate when someone hurts me. There are other ways to solve that . . . Because I play sports I turn to spirits, and think of God more" (Player 5). Coming from an intense lacrosse player, this point reveals how her relationship with God enables higher moral standards. She spoke about her passion and enthusiasm for sport, which religion can even foster. Another Christian, Player 6, was a football player who agreed with her basic premise: "I don't find that sport conflicts with going to church . . . Sports have you bring a team together, not just individuals, to make something great . . . Forgiveness is key, even if someone attacks you, you don't go and get revenge." Both individuals found that their religious faith was a moral support in athletics; it did not require quitting competitive sports. Instead, according to the football player, religious faith can assist in overcoming indifference to others and promoting humility. A religiously-unaffiliated basketball player (11) told this related story:

Before, when I was at a public school, I would see someone do a quick prayer alone before a game . . . I knew that [he] was praying because during warm-up he would hang around the bench a bit longer and take a knee . . . At the time I didn't understand it. I didn't see the importance because it was only exhibition junior high ball! . . . But I see it differently now (not just with praying): you take everything with the same seriousness and try your hardest no matter what.

After thinking about this kneeling basketball player, Player 11 realized that his teammate was not a zealot, but always offered his best to God instead of settling for mediocrity. In this way, he came to understand prayer as bringing out the best in a person. Overall, the above three stories show how religion set a higher standard which these players tried to follow.

Despite the supportive role religion can play for setting moral standards, it was necessary to ask about sports' competitive, aggressive nature: is this not morally counter to the gospel of love and mercy (Hoffman)? Examples of sports' dark underside abounded in the interviews. Player 1 reported opponents who are unsportsmanlike that "make you really mad" and "make you want to react in a negative way." In such intense circumstances, youth found it hard to

contain emotions. For instance, Player 4 admitted that when girls yell at her, she tried her best not to engage in the trash-talking since “we were taught not to like mix our feelings with how we play.” Many players spoke about trash-talking opponents in hopes of stirring frustration that would result in ejection from play (Player 12). Player 6 kept playing the “violent” game of football even when he knows “guys who are out there to hurt people.” Player 8 admitted that “sometimes the competitiveness [on her own team] gets to me, but then [she remembers] that other teams are more competitive than my team so then I stay on my team.” Another female volleyball player named the hypothetical problem of Jesus sitting on the players’ bench: “[Jesus] would have a lot of religious teaching that might not coincide exactly [with sports] and would make everyone not want to win as much” (Player 7).

There was a tension, therefore, between the insight that religion made the athletes better people and competitive sports’ aggressive nature. In a strongly performance-based environment, with an emphasis on winning and competition, sport itself becomes intensely-felt as a matter of life and death and student-athletes’ identities are threatened (Carless and Douglas: 702). Because youth reported competing for future scholarships, playing time, or advancement to the next level, they were driven to gain whatever advantage was possible – including using religious practices alongside hard work, mental preparation, trash-talking, intimidation, etc. Some players noted that they were more likely to pray when their competitive spirit increased, such as before more significant games in a season. And they also spoke about higher likelihood of worse ethical behavior when competitive intensity rose – as per the theoretical example of the youth not wanting Jesus on her team.

The adage that “there are no atheists in foxholes” comes to mind in reflecting upon these highly competitive students. Although these youth were more strongly affiliated with religion than the general population, it remains noteworthy that the intensity and emotion of sport brings out their religiousness (and their connection to God, for the religiously unaffiliated). While actions arising in the competitive intensity of sport are often counter to ethical religious practices endorsed by their religious traditions, the human drive for victory in competition draws out an impulse for assistance from a higher power.

#### *Religion and Spirituality Influence Athletes Socially*

Socially, students placed importance on the mentorship offered by their educator-coaches in Catholic schooling and showed respect for their teammates’ religious beliefs, despite rarely talking about things of a religious or spiritual nature. Many players noted, in the context of family-like relationships on a team, the positive influence of coaches as mentors who sometimes functioned as life coaches or spiritual directors. This reality reflects the history of Christianity influencing Canadian sport, in which church leaders emphasized positive values and development of youth over an evangelism that sought religious conversion of youth (see Kidd; McLeod). More recently, Martin Camiré found coaches able to positively influence student-athletes who were dealing with critical family and personal issues, paralleling the role of teacher-coaches reported in this study. Player 11 admitted that from the outside, it can “definitely look like they are pushing you too hard” but that “[coaches] are pushing you so that you will get better . . . Looking back you realize that they definitely had your best interests the whole time and . . . that you wouldn’t have gotten as good as you are if they hadn’t pushed you.” This player underlined the challenge that coaches placed before him, daring him to



become better and pushing him harder than he would have pushed himself. Player 4, underlining a more explicitly religious element in the coaching she received, explained that “my coaches have always been my Catholic teachers so they have always taught me to practice Christian morals.” Many players noted coaches leading team prayers and one explained how the coach would take an inspirational quote and reflect on it morally and spiritually (Player 2). Several players added that they would like to be coaches in the future: “I want to coach so that I can pass things onto the younger ones . . . It wouldn’t even necessarily be physical things, but mental things, like how to get into game mode or bringing your faith [into sports]” (Player 5). Despite stories of negative influences of some coaches, the guidance of positive mentoring coaches impacted and changed the lives of many student-athletes beyond the x’s and o’s of sport and reflected the influence of muscular Christianity in Canada.

While coaches acted as mentors for student-athletes and supported their integral development, youth also noted how peers promoted respect for religious traditions and other persons. This was evident in one focus group that considered the use of religion and spirituality to support their future coaching practices. They first suggested a general, inclusive prayer that would not proselytize players on the team, something that would respect the religiously unaffiliated. They recognized their pluralistic setting, even within a Catholic school, and questioned the use of the Lord’s Prayer. Player 11 suggested offering players five minutes of silence before a game during which youth could pray, meditate, or simply visualize the game – but he was not sure how everyone would react. Overall, their response showed respect for teammates’ differences and simultaneously did not equate to disavowing their own religion: they wanted to respect all their peers. As part of a pluralistic society with various religious traditions, youth accepted differences between religions as one might expect, even in a Catholic school setting. From the other focus group, Player 4 summed it up this way: “Don’t forget that you are a human being and don’t hurt other human beings . . . I would never want to force religion onto someone else.”

The students also reported that they rarely socialized with others about religion or their ritualized practices in sport. Players respected that others might pray before a game or have different ritualistic practices, but they seldom spoke about this element with others, leaving religion and spirituality to the private realm – with the exception of non-sectarian team prayers sometimes recited before a game. Player 2, who was a Catholic, explained many elements within his reasoning:

I only talk about religion with a buddy I’m close with. You don’t want to introduce something as controversial as religion [to sports] . . . Other guys might make fun of a religion of someone who believes really strongly . . . Religion is more of a personal thing . . . sharing your social life and spirituality with another person [who you are close to] takes away the divide between persons.

This student explained that only in an intimate relationship would he talk about religion because of its apparent private nature, possible teasing over religious differences, and its potential toxicity to a team social environment. Despite knowing that talking about religious matters can produce understanding amongst others, such discussions are relegated to the private realm even for those vocal about their religious faith because they would fear being

bullied by others. Because religion might be cause for friction among teammates, discussion of its applicability to sport is absent except when like-minded people (as reported by Players 2, 4, and 5) can carry on a private conversation about the “sacred” in sporting situations (Ammerman: 302). Despite general high levels of intimacy among teammates in competitive sport, religion and spirituality remain a socially taboo topic.

Overall, the students’ level of respect for others had limits: an open defense of religious difference was juxtaposed with frowning upon public or ongoing outward displays of religion and spirituality. This privatization of religion, according to Steve Bruce’s sociological critique, “removes much of the social support that is vital to reinforcing beliefs, makes the maintenance of distinct lifestyles very difficult . . . and encourages a *de facto* relativism that is fatal to shared beliefs” (20). Commenting on a largely secular Canadian context, Joel Thiessen points out that pluralistic values are embedded as national, social values: “Regardless of one’s religious or secular identification, Canadians generally believe that tolerance and accommodation ought to accompany religious and cultural diversity,” meaning that “individuals can choose and construct a faith that works for them without forcing their religious beliefs and practices on to others, or fearing that others will impose their religion” (5). This raises questions for the incorporation of religion and spirituality for the integral development of youth in Catholic school athletics.

### Implications

Assuming the absence of figures like Bauer and Murray to guide sports programs, how can current Catholic educational leaders include religion and spirituality in the psychological, moral and social development of students who participate in sports? To begin, the thoughts and stories of these student-athletes support the schools’ aim for the integral development of youth instead of a proselytizing form of muscular Christianity. These schools aim to be places of respect for difference (Congregation of Catholic Education 2013: 55), as exemplified by students putting a high premium on respecting religious differences. Canadian society generally supports tolerance and understanding, as historically revealed in compromises between the English and French for the sake of nation building, and in sports figures like Bauer and Murray who promoted ecumenical and interfaith environments for sport (Gorman: 33, 114-16).

Students’ respect for others, unfortunately, did not translate into seeing sports as an avenue for dialogue and understanding of religious difference. Few athletes spoke with others about religiosity, and then only with very close friends. This was disappointing, yet not surprising. Much work in sport studies, such as by William Barbieri, underlines sport’s potential to build understanding and peace among people. Yet in the lives of these students, the social dimension of religion appeared best regimented to the private realm because it was problematic if expressed too openly. When teams put aside differences and unite for victory, athletes are unlikely to raise religious differences because of potential animosity created among players. In effect, religion and its rituals remain socially marginalized for these young athletes, thus revealing a shortcoming in terms of sport’s ability to heal societal divides.

This creates a paradoxical situation: youth wanted to respect others’ religions while performing their own religious practices for their felt benefits. The apparent conflict made it difficult to integrate different social roles – as an athlete and a religious/spiritual person – and

revealed how youth compartmentalize their lives (Fowler: 173). Player 12 exemplifies this: “Sports and everything else in my life is totally separate . . . I do sports, I don’t really think. I just do it and just enjoy it and then I go on with the rest of my day and then sleep.” The division of social roles and the apparent lack of internal unity exemplify compartmentalization and undercut a pillar in the integral formation of youth. For Player 1, it was not necessary to bring her Catholic faith to sport: “Religious practices don’t really affect sport.” She had an advanced understanding of sport, fair play, sportsmanship, and success in sport – seemingly from the strong influence of her parent-coach – but she saw a very limited role for religion and only mentioned rare moments of intercessory prayer. On the other hand, Player 4 was also raised Catholic and concluded her interview by saying: “I have really thought of spirituality as separate and sports as separate, but then I look about how I play and I realize that my spirituality determines who I am as a basketball player and how I act on the court even though you wouldn’t think that it does.” Despite support from religious influences – i.e., her parents and coaches – she had not brought the two worlds of sport and religious faith together. Many players noted that a person should be the same player on and off the court, but the implication of this was not always recognized for them personally. Overall, then, youth showed a lack of reflection on the topic and an inability to face the tensions between sporting and religious participation. A question like, “How does religion or spirituality influence my sports participation?” was not previously considered before these interviews. And recall that this sample contained students who were open to interviewing about religion and spirituality, believed in God, went to Catholic schools, and many of whom went to religious services with family.

If Catholic high schools in Canada want to promote the integral development of youth through their sports programming, then planned learning for students on religion and spirituality in sports is required. Clearly, students reported a lack of reflection toward a lived experience of religion in sport. Interviewed youth spoke about how their passion for sports shaped a significant part of their identities and directed many of their social relations. The practice of thinking about and discussing faith within a sporting context, however, felt foreign to many of them. It appeared that there was little previous intentional reflection on the subject. This was not the case for all areas of sport, as they offered critical thoughts on the abuse of power by coaches (Players 1 and 3), dangers of concussions (Players 2 and 6), and sexism in sport (Player 9), despite accepting much conventional thinking in sport.

While student-athletes seldom reported talking about religion and spirituality with teammates, their integral development requires that they be provided with opportunities to reflect and think about this element in sport. Examining sporting paradoxes, for example, that one’s competitor both challenges and supports one’s own performance, can deepen young people’s understanding of their sporting experiences, complementing adolescent development with more complex, abstract thinking that becomes possible as youth move toward young adulthood (Pressley and McCormick). Pondering why athletes complete religious and personal rituals despite their felt irrationality could lead to acknowledging the human need for ritual, the need to be connected to something beyond oneself, and the centrality of sacraments for Christian life. When students experienced more intense emotions in sport, they felt greater existential angst and greater reliance on religion and spirituality: how might these young athletes make sense of this in their everyday living? Considering what luck is, for instance,

opens several questions about their abilities, their limitations, the value of gratitude, and the theological meaning of grace. Reflecting on these matters raises awareness about the broad reach of sports, how they connect several elements of life, and why they are a valuable gateway to integral development in their lives. Further insight can be drawn from the work of researchers and educators like Richard McGrath, Clark Power and Alesha Seroczynski, and Patrick Kelly.

My point is not to over-stretch religion, making its presence a strained ubiquity in sport. Rather, I want to take seriously the idea of the integral formation of youth in sport – which surely must include people’s religion or spirituality for Catholic education. As stated earlier, there is a risk that Catholic schools become guided by neo-liberal views that focus on external skills, efficiency, and psychological techniques instead of primarily understanding the person as a unity-of-being with many dimensions. In youth sports, with the increasing emphasis on sport specialization and rigorous training regiments, it would be easy to neglect or, as D’Souza complains, leave to “vague generalizations and tired platitudes” (140) the integral development of youth in school sports.

Engaging sport for the holistic development of youth faces noticeable challenges. Drawing from the reported experiences of these 15-year-olds, there is a lack of institutional support for religious practices from schools and churches. Few connections between churches and sports were made, and no one mentioned chaplaincy programs. Nonetheless, Player 10 did name a trainer who often led the pre-game prayer; Player 2 reported his teacher-coach leading a moment of reflection and inspiration during school hours in a school sports academy; Player 11, a religious none, noted a priest who preached during a school Mass and who said players could embody an athleticism that is a gift from God. These three examples are supportive of Catholic religious practices, but each is reliant on the determination and decision-making of an individual and not directed institutionally by educational leadership. Contemporary sport’s tendency toward commercialization and promotion of perfectionisms and materialistic lifestyles (Watson: 4) fly in the face of tending to the human person holistically and require a coordinated institutional response.

The task of integrating faith with sport in the school setting – sometimes also called infusion or permeation of faith – is a difficult task to accomplish without institutional support and direction. Rymarz argues that Catholic schools face many hurdles in this regard: a loosely affiliated teaching staff, secular assumptions in society, and a lack of training in this task, not to mention the engrained traditions and competitiveness of sports themselves (90-97). Unlike days past when religious or priests like Murray and Bauer had a larger presence in schools, there now appears a lack of intentional programming. In terms of the integral development of youth, it is reasonable to suggest that there is trepidation because of sports’ morally destructive traditions: that is, their overly competitive ethos can easily lead to cheating, violence, use of illegal performance enhancers, etc. But what is needed is a courageous response from leadership instead of avoidance of the problem or declarations that schools should get out of sports.

As can be concluded from this article about students’ religion and spirituality in sport, it is inadequate to assume students’ integral development in Canadian Catholic schooling sports’ programs. Educational leaders cannot presume that sports naturally develop character or that

students' competitiveness is key to personal growth (Hoffman: 263). For educators wishing to promote a vision of integral development, what is needed is "a type of paradigm shift," as articulated by the former head of the Vatican's Church and Sport section, Kevin Lixey (251), that sees work with youth not only focused on skills and technique but attentive to the athlete as a whole, including the religious dimension. This reflects the pleading of Pope Francis who sees "the greatest crisis of education" as related to the neglect of any sense of transcendence and a focus strictly on "immanent things." Promoting persons as both body and spirit, which includes the person's psychological growth and religious spirituality, considers people's potential for great moral depth and intimacy with others. Capturing a holistic viewpoint that extends beyond the skills and techniques of sport enables educators to make use of the riches of the Catholic intellectual tradition. Engaging the religious and spiritual dimension can help shape students psychologically, morally and socially and pave the way toward a larger vision of sport similar to that embraced by Canadians like Bauer and Murray – but updated for our context today.

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