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## The Efficacy of Prayer on Winning in Sport Competitions

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### ABSTRACT

*Prayers, sports and competition have shared great wealth of history and interrelationship in recent times. More too often, controversies have risen on whether prayer has an influence on the outcomes of competitive events. Several researchers have given their opinions but a large number of religious individuals most importantly, Christians believe prayer to be the master key, a smooth, easy and most effective communication channel to the Supreme Being of the universe. As such, the wide majority leverage on the power of prayer to influence results in competitive circumstances. An attempt to scientifically analyse prayer's efficacy would be highly limited and proof abortive. However a multidimensional approach involving models and subjective experiences helped in simplifying this controversial and abstract topic. Matters concerning sports like safety, ability, stress and performances of athletes are growing concerns heavily laid with uncertainty. This, in many circumstances, are beyond the control of the athletes and organizers, leaving athletes with the sole option of making rituals and prayer to the power beyond. For this unparalleled cause, this review has deemed it sacrosanct to place its circumvent searchlight fervently conceptualizing issues, experiences and accounts of sportsmen with a quest to give better and readily agreeable conclusions regarding the efficacy of prayer on winning in sports competition.*

**Keywords:** efficacy, prayer, competition, athletes

### INTRODUCTION

Over time, since the evolution of competitive sport in the world, a lot of matters have been raised surrounding the relationship between religiosity, spirituality and sport competitions. For this cause, this research will be concerned with a conceptual examination of what importance prayer- a key element of spirituality and religiosity- has on winning in competitive sports. In the cause of this conceptual review, it will be thoroughly out of place not to shallowly stake little claims on what Christianity represents.

According to Merriam Webster, a Christian is one who professes the belief in the teaching of Jesus Christ. Hence, in simplicity, the ability to conform to the teachings of Christ is called Christianity. Christians are monotheistic, and they believe that God created the heavens and the earth. This divine Godhead consists of three parts: the Father (God Himself), the Son (Jesus Christ) and the Holy Spirit. James (1963) posits Prayer to be the soul and essence of religion. Christianity is the faith tradition that focuses on the figure of Jesus Christ. It is more than a system of religious belief, it has generated a culture, set of ideas and way of life, practices (example – prayer), artifacts that have been handed down from generation to generation since Jesus became the first object of faith (Stefon et al 2020). Christians believe that it is through prayer that God's grace and guidance are given. They pray in various manners and offer different forms of prayer. Although the most common Christian prayer is termed the Lord's Prayer found in Mathew 6; 9-13, The holy book of 1 Thessalonians 5; 17 emphasized incessant prayers. Prayer is a watch word and practice for followers of the holy book.

In western world, Christians portray spirituality to be the offering of prayers, worship and devotions. The Advanced Oxford Dictionary defined prayer as a solemn request for help or expression of thanks addressed to God or another deity. Yonggi Cho (2019) termed Prayer as the powerful key capable of presenting great revival. The researcher perceives it to be an act of communication by humans with the sacred or holy God. Today, Prayer as a spiritual exercise has moved beyond the church and has come to stay in the world of sport as the religion gives an impression that prayer should be prioritized in all occasions (E.M Bounds, 2009). This, they say, enables the Holy Spirit to come to their aid. According to Wikipedia in 2020, the number of Christians in the globe rose to about 2.4 billion followers which is one third of the entire world population with America having a whopping 71 percent of the total number of Christians in the world. At least, the percentage of Americans that pray occasionally has been

remarkably stable in survey since 1948(Gallup report 1987). With the beaming populations of Christians in the world, one would propose that a substantial number of these individuals are sportsmen and as a result, inject their faith into their actions in competitions. Allyson Felix (American track and field sprinter), Roger Federer (tennis player) and Kevin Durant (basketball player) are few names among the renowned Christian sportsmen who have not shied away from their faith.

Conceptualizing prayer from the African perspective over time has an unlimited and diverse operation of the religion. Hence, Christians' African prayer requires an in depth and all encompassing survey. Africans have shown great commitment and steadfastness in matters surrounding religiosity, spirituality and most especially in the exercise of their faith with belief in the Supreme Being. A cluster of these claims and attitudinal disposition of the African populace fueled the sporadic eruption of lots of denomination with different and diverse approaches to elements of the religion such as prayer. Lately, there have been reports of mega concerts, large open air crusades and aggressive evangelical movement across Africa by different authorities in the fold. All of these different quarters have great testimonies buttressing and representing the wide claims of prayer efficacy not just among the inhabitants of the continent in their daily engagements but also among competitive sportsmen.

Finney and Malony (1985) in their quest to uncover why most people offer prayer established that people engages in prayer for so many reasons. The most common form of prayer is the petitionary prayer. It is believed that prayers in form of petitions positively adjust the individual to situations that would have posed a reasonable degree of discomfort. Further findings suggest that petitionary prayer is motivated by the need to adjust to frustration and unusual situation. As noted, various types of prayer have been conceptually delineated, but in recognition that these types of prayers should be empirical. We have different types of prayer and many philosophers and theologians have given different types and modes of prayer in the past. The list of different types of prayer is endless, although many of these types are synonymous but perceived in different light to different researchers. Widespread examples are mystical, prophetic, meditative, contemplative and petitionary. Obviously, the nature of prayer cannot be captured by the dichotomous descriptions.

Notably, Pratt (1930) was able to establish a dichotomy in the types of prayer where he distinguished between objective and subjective prayer. In his explanation, objective prayer is prayer offered in conformity with focus on God while subjective prayers are offered based on the need of the person. Subjective form of prayer is predominant among sportsmen who are concerned with winning during competitive sports.

According to Cambridge English dictionary, sport is a game, competition, or activity needing physical efforts and skills that is played according to the rules and regulations for enjoyment, as a job or profession. It is more than just fun, games and entertainment for the masses, athletes, coaches, parents and fans. Sportsmen are drawn to training, focus, discipline, loyalty and competition. The quest to win draws on cooperation, concentration, coordination and creativity. Competitive event is seen as a chance to dominate others and display assertiveness (Ives et al 2020).

## **BODY OF DISCUSSION**

Discussion of faith and the observation of religious practices was not dominant among athletes in the 1970's and 80's. However, recently the narrative has changed. Many athletes turn to faith for answers to life questions. Within the modern sports context, prayer is one of the most commonly observed religious practices. Prayer unites teammates and prepares them to go into games together because it serves as an effective means of reducing separation, animosity and prejudice before competition. Different prayer routines have been embraced among sportsmen and the general populace. Malinowski noted that as the level of uncertainty of success in an endeavour increases, the more commonly individuals turn to magical and superstitious behaviour in an effort to control the outcome (Malinowski, 1948).

Krieder (2003) observed that prayers offered by athletes are often equated to asking God for the provision of a miracle. According to Mark (2000), Prayer is sometimes used as a coping strategy. He further emphasized the seven general dimensions of coping strategies identified: psychological training, training and strategies, somatic relaxation, hobby activities, social support, prayer, and substance use.

There is an extrinsic motivation behind pre-game team prayers. The goal of said prayers is to enhance the performance of the team and to increase the probability of success. Athletes regularly use prayer to enhance their performance and overall well-being. They pray before games to calm themselves and cope with the stress and anxiety associated with potential injury. They offer prayers before athletic contests, seeking God's help in playing to their full potential. Each of these prayers are uttered

with extrinsic goals of performance in mind some pray for others to perform poorly but rarely admit it (Aicinena, 2013)

Prayers offered for each of the reasons listed above are made with secular goals in mind. Regardless of whether a devout follower of the Christ or an atheist offers such prayers, the goals of the prayers are the same: performance enhancement and victory. Performance and victory are both secular concerns because it seems unreasonable to believe that performance enhancement or victory would be proper motivations for Christian prayer. As such, most prayers offered in conjunction with sport participation are not to be considered sincere Christian prayers.

Today, a large number of American teams in Major League Baseball, National Basketball Association and the National Football League hold Sunday chapel services prior to games. Some athletes in this league pray conventionally as a team, reciting the Lord's Prayer alongside this prayer before competitions.

Brandon Sneed, published in his July edition of the *Outside* magazine, said "Christians willing to combine the effectiveness of prayer and consistent preparation towards a competitive events, should embrace offering a simple prayer that brings peace to one's soul". Further, He gave an account of Ryan Hall, an elite runner and a devout Christian.

In 2007, Ryan hall ran the Houston half marathon. The race was a little longer than 13 miles. He was having a great time. He ran each mile for four minutes twenty seconds (4.20). He was winning the race. Few minutes off the finish line. Hall felt his stomach tense and gradually it became really painful. This occurred due to the long and difficult exercise. At the onset, he ignored it and kept pushing but the discomfort persisted, then got worse. Panic took hold. Hall, being a Christian, prayed. This is something he does every day. Hall went on to win the race in fifty nine minutes forty three seconds (59:43), a North American record and at the time, the fastest half marathon ever run by a non- African. Remembering the day and the pain he went through, Hall when interviewed said ...there is definitely power in prayer. (Sneed B. & Techosky 2017)

Brandon Sneed also interviewed renowned neuroscientists Andrew Newberg, director of research at Thomas Jefferson University Hospital's Marcus Institute of integrative health who explained the neurological effects of believer's prayer on the brain. He spent a large portion of his career studying the effects of religious faith on our mental hardware. "When you pray, it changes our brain" he said. In his research, Newberg found that prayers allows his subjects to more quickly and efficiently achieve flow that coveted a state of mind most commonly described as being in the zone. During this flow, a cascade of neurochemicals including dopamine (which regulates pleasure) and Serotonin (which reduces stress) descends into the brain. The brain also undergoes electrical changes.

Having fully established that the place of prayer is a strong determinant to winning for those who believes in its efficacy, Czech (2001) recommended a four part or theme of interrelated prayer models that could serve as a structure for Christian athletes. Many athletes fancied the different phases of prayer and ensured that the place of adequate preparation is not ignored.

The themes are more discrete and uniform than in the interview where the focus moved back and forth between the four different phases. The themes are highlighted below

- Performance-related prayers (before, during and after )
- Prayer routine
- Thankfulness
- Acceptance of God's will

**Performance related prayer:** This form of prayer is channelled towards performance enhancement techniques which are believed to enhance physical and mental exercise which help to enhance performance (Wrisberg, 2000). Participants interviewed by Czech ascertained that prayer reduces anxiety, stress and promotes strength, provides safety, security and allows them to play to their very best of their ability. The athletes suggested that prayer has a positive mental practice that helped their performance considerably.

**Prayer routine:** Participants described prayer routines as prayer that is performed before, during and after performance or competition. The participants felt strongly about the usage of prayer routines during the practice sessions and competitive events. The routines are seldom deviated from or changed. Many athletes follow a routine before the start of their performance and they follow same routines no matter the situation.

**Thankfulness:** Athletes agreed that thanks and appreciation were given for talent level, perfor-

mances and the notion of being able to play sports. The athlete utilized thankfulness to God as a motivation to play with full effort.

Acceptance of God's will: Athletes who are believers pray for the will of God to precede their own interest. These abilities described believing in God's will as a way to keep a balance between the highs and lows that one encounters through life.

## TO ACHIEVE WINNING IN SPORTS

To win a sporting game or competition, it is very important the athletes carry out regular exercises to maintain a good fitness level for the body through routine physical training. This would not only help avert injuries but also improves the performance of athletes; however, good nutrition in accordance with dietary requirements for the sport, enough rest, determination, enjoyment of the game and familiarization with the nitty-gritty of the game would also bolster an athlete's chances of winning.

## CONCLUSION

If a Supreme Being can meaningfully answer a believer's prayer, and if prayer is to remain spiritual rather than a magical exercise, then surely that same Supreme Being would ensure that all empirical studies of the efficacy of prayer turns out inconclusive for those who choose to be double minded. Though sports do not offer explanations for many of life's greatest questions, it does supply meaning to the lives of multitudes throughout the world.

Based on the findings of this study, Prayer have proved its effectiveness in contrasting the negative effects of occupational stress and burnout among professionals (Chirico et al 2020). Take for instance, Chelladurai (2018) established that families that pray together have a more healthy relationship than others that do not. In this vein, teams that pray in one accord before competitive games develop the mindsets of togetherness and unity which is a strong force in achieving victories. Concurrently, Pre-game routines are important psychologically and spiritually for athletes because they help calm their minds and make the athlete focus on the task at hand.

It is therefore concluded that prayer has a relatively strong influence on winning in competitive sports among athletes.

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