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## Religiosity and Spirituality in Sports: Implication For Athletes' Performance

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### ABSTRACT

*In the present world of sports, religiosity and spirituality have become dominant parts of an athlete's performance. Religiosity and spirituality are related but distinct; spirituality is identified as the interconnectedness with a transcendent being while religiosity is the interpersonal and institutional engagement with a formal religious group, doctrines and traditions. These relationships are not only practiced for health and quality of life purposes but also becoming a practice in sports. Moreover, most athletes on the field of play showcase some forms of religious belief and behavior before, during and after a sporting contest. This paper explores religiosity and spirituality in sports and seeks to find their effects on an athlete's performance. The concepts of religiosity/ spirituality in sports were critically reviewed. The paper also discussed the concept of an athlete's performance. Likewise, the concept of sports was discussed. It concludes among other considerations that athletes who are very religious/ spiritual while engaging in sports, seek secular goals such performance enhancement, coping optimally with stress and anxiety, maintaining safety, and playing at one's best ability, being in good health physically and mentally as well as resounding successes, great laurels and victories. It is suggested among others that players, coaches, managers and sport psychologists should appropriately distinguish between upholding religious and spiritual conviction in sports and adequately preparing for sports contest towards achieving set goals during such sporting contests.*

**Keywords:** sports, religiosity, spirituality, athletes' performance, prayers

### INTRODUCTION

Religion and spirituality is now part and parcel of global sports, and has been accepted as a necessity among athletes especially in developing countries and Nigeria being a key practitioner. Most athletes on the field of play showcase some forms of religion/spiritual belief and behaviour before, during and after a sporting contest. Researches have shown that religiosity and spirituality occupy a vital place in sports (Jackson & Wood, 2018; Aicinema, 2018; Jonathan & Jeffrey, 2015; Watson & Parker, 2014 & Rial, 2012). The prominent popularity of Pentecostalism and charismatic Christianity has greatly influenced the relationship between religion/spirituality and sports in sub-Saharan Africa, where membership of Christian denominations is very common (Carrette & King 2005 & Meyer, 2004).

Globally, there is no unifying definition for the terms 'religiosity and spirituality' (Snider & McPhedran, 2014). It has been observed that there is a very thin line between religion and spirituality because of the ambiguity accorded to these concepts (Tu, 2006 & Tanyi, 2002). Some individuals may say that religiosity is embedded in spirituality, but that will not be accepted by a yoga practitioners or an atheist (Tanyi, 2002). Other authors see religiosity and spirituality as being two branches of the holistic category of paranormal belief (Benson et al; 2003). Schofield et al. (2016) stated that "*when concepts such as religion are defined, the only person likely to agree with a given definition is its author*". Religiosity and spirituality are frequently used interchangeably, but the two concepts are different. Arrey et al. (2016) cited Crockett & Voas (2006) and Voas & Crockett (2005) 'who asserted that there is a generational decline in belief system towards religion and spirituality in Western Europe and in most developed countries'. Conversely, Carrette & King (2005) and Sovran (2013) observed that in sub-Saharan Africa, several individuals still believe and are affiliated with a spiritual/religious institutions and religiosity is a common phenomenon.

It is on this premise that Kučič and Spehnjak (2015) defined religiosity as a human phenomenon, which is based on man's relationship to the sacred, the paranormal and religion. Koenig (2005) refer to religiosity as a process of organized beliefs through which the practice of rituals and symbols takes

place. Similarly, Knitter (2010), stated that religiosity is all about religious experience, which is practiced through a firm belief and affection that helps the practitioners to familiarise themselves with the supernatural. Greenfield et al. (2009) defined religiosity as the interpersonal and institutional engagement with a formal religious group, doctrines and traditions.

Dein (2005) identified spirituality as the interconnectedness with a transcendent being. Correspondingly, other authors agreed that spirituality refers to the universal human seeking for the meaning of their existence, which often involved some degree of transcendence (Hal et al; 2004; Astrow et al; 2001). While, Schofield et al. (2016) also refer to spirituality as a more personal notion. On the other hand, Arrey et al. (2016) quoted Kaplan (2006) which holds that spirituality is more than prayer, meditation, contemplation or personal reflection. It gives a sense of meaning to everyday life.

For the purpose of this study, religiosity and spirituality will be viewed as two different typologies but referred to as one all-encompassing category, 'religiosity/spirituality', whereby the practitioners of both are seeking the attention of a Supreme Being to their affairs but through a different methods or patterns. This corroborates Benson et al. (2003), who perceive religiosity and spirituality as being two branches of the all-encompassing category of supernatural belief.

Religiosity/spirituality in sports has been identified from research as playing a central role in sports and has raised many concerns, especially as it affects an athlete's performance. Therefore, in line with previous research that has examined the complex role of religion and spirituality in sport, this current study seeks to find out its implications on an athlete's performance.

### CONCEPT OF SPORTS

Sport is a vital social phenomenon that has the force to penetrate different traditions and cultures. Dauda et al. (2015) defined sports as an institutionalized competitive and skilful physical activity that requires efforts and fair play. While, Vasil (2018) defined sport as socio-cultural phenomenon, with a historic determined activity of people connected with the use of physical exercises, which is aimed at preparing and participating in a specially organized system of competitions.

Joel & Dominic (2021) observed that sports has proved to be a means of profitably engaging the growing population of youths as it provides several jobs opportunities. Aicinen (2018) opined that sport has some similarities with religion because both provide a sense of belonging and values formation. They also help participants become better people. This suggested why religiosity/spirituality dominate sports today. Kučič and Spehnik (2015) revealed that sports is very influential in establishing connections between different people, from different religions and world views, and connects the world at large.

### CONCEPT OF ATHLETE PERFORMANCE

Athletes are the center of attraction in sports. Equally, they are the stars and celebrities in sports. According to Balyi and Hamitom (2014), an athlete is defined as that individual who is trained for peak performance in order to engage in sports competitions. An athlete's performance can be referred to as the conscious effort an athlete inserted during a sporting contest for the purpose of becoming successful.

Before, during and after performance, most athletes who uphold religions/ spiritual convictions propagate religious/ spiritual messages through emblazoning them on their playing equipment. Vivid examples include the former Brazilian national football players such as Claudio Taffarel, Jorge de Amorim Campos (famously known as Jorginho), Ricardo Kaka, Lucimar Ferreira da Silva (famously known as Lucio), among others and this was noticeable at the Federation International de Football Association (FIFA) World Cup 2002 in Japan on the field of play after the Brazilian team won the final match. This assertion is justified by Rial's 2012 study titled *Brazilian athletes as New Missionaries of the neo-Pentecostal Diaspora*. Rial, further observed that athletes has become "selfless soldiers of the word (religion/spiritual words)," who demonstrate their religious faith globally and spread their faith through various media.

### CONCEPT OF RELIGIOSITY/SPIRITUALITY IN SPORTS

Religiosity/spirituality has become a key part in sports as athletes performed various religious/spiritual rituals before, during and after a sporting contest such as praying, singing religiously/spiritually, making religious/spiritual signs and symbols, religious/ spiritual propagation, emblazoning of religious/spiritual words on playing equipment, tattooing religious/spiritual words and symbols, the athlete's church attendance, faith, special all night prayers and personal devotion (Ugba, 2017; Czech et al., 2004 & Rial, 2012). And these can be seemed as the major means to connect to God by athletes.

Prayer is an important aspect of religiosity/spirituality. It is the common religious/spiritual prac-

tice of communicating to God. Siltan et al. (2012) defined prayer as the believer's conscious effort to commune with the Creator or paranormal entity. Prayers by athletes have become a popular phenomenon in sports and this can be a personal or team engagement. Aicinena (2018) and Willett et al (2014) noted that it is perhaps the most commonly religious/spiritual resources used by athletes. Most athletes have the habit of praying before and after a sporting contest either personally or as a team (Czech et al., 2004 & Rial, 2012). According to Czech and Bullett 2007 study of collegiate athletes, it was observed that the persistence and intensity of prayer depends on the importance of the sporting contest.

There are various sport-related prayer requests. Aicinena (2018) observed that there is selfishness behind pre-game team prayer requests. He also revealed that most athletes engaged in prayers in sports to seek better performance, cope with the uncertainty existent in sport and success during a sporting contest. Similarly, Czech et al. (2004) indicated that athletes frequently engage in sport-related prayers to enhance their performance, thanks and appreciation for talent, ability, performance and acceptance of matches result as God's will. Krieder (2003) noted that athletes often pray for miracles before a sporting contest and he also asserted that athletes pray for opponents not to succeed during a sporting contest. Other athletes participate in pre-match prayer activities to maintain calmness and to cope with anxiety and stress during the contest (Womack, 1992). Nevertheless, the sport-related prayer request offered by athletes, Aicinena (2018) concluded, are all triggered by extrinsic motivation with secular goals in mind such as performance enhancement, coping optimally with stress and anxiety, maintaining safety, playing at one's best ability, being in good health physically and mentally as well as resounding successes, great laurels and victories.

### **IMPLICATION OF RELIGIOSITY/SPIRITUALITY IN SPORTS ON AN ATHLETE'S PERFORMANCE**

The integration of religion and spirituality into sports has altered athletes' performance in various ways. Coakey (2009); Dana and Sabzi (2013); Kučič and Spehnyak (2015); Proios (2016); Bartošová and Burešová (2017) have proved that engagement in religious/spiritual activities by athletes has definite implications on their performance. It was observed from previous researches that the most common implications of religiosity/spirituality of sports on athlete's performance are;

- Enhance performance
- Success/victory
- Reduction of anxiety/stress
- Prevention of risky behavior

### **ENHANCE PERFORMANCE**

Engaging religion/spirituality in sports has showed its ability to enhance the performance of most athletes. Dana & Sabzi (2013) opined that religion/spirituality can improve athletic performance. Participating in pre-match prayer has proved to be a practice that enhances an athlete's performance during sporting contests (Czech et al., 2004). Jirásek (2018) was of the opinion that peak performance can also be achieved through athletes' engagement in spiritual activities. Similarly, Aicinena (2018) pointed out that the common goal of all sport-related prayer is performance enhancement. Azimirad and Jalilvand (2012) also posited that athletes may have a better performance if they have faith in some sort of spiritual activities.

It was also discovered by previous researchers that the primary source of enhance performance was a link to self-confidence during sporting contests, which is also triggered by engagement in religious/spiritual activities. (Azimirad & Jalilvand, 2012; Bartošová & Burešová, 2017).

### **SUCCESS/VICTORY**

The ultimate reason for every sports contest is success/victory; therefore, every athletes want to do all they can in their capacity to achieve it. This substantiates a previous study by Aicinena (2018) who concluded that the main goal of most sport-related prayers is to increase the probability of success. Kučič and Spehnyak (2015) noted that with religiosity, victory may be easily accomplished in sports. Elsewhere, Coakey (2009) asserted that religion can be used to achieve success in competitive sport contest.

### **REDUCTION OF ANXIETY AND STRESS**

Sports performance comes with several (positive and negative) emotional demands with anxiety and stress being part of negative emotional demands in sport. These should be managed appropriately to enhance performance. Bartošová and Burešová (2017) posited that religion has the capacity to reduce

anxiety during a sporting contest. Bell et al. (2009) likewise indicated that religious practices provide athletes relief from fear and anxiety through their faith that God is in charge of the situation. Jirásek (2018) further stated that spiritual activities such as prayer is a technique athletes use to cope with anxiety and stress and this is consistent with the findings of Czesz et al. (2004) who observed that prayer is an essential tool athletes use to deal with anxiety and stress.

According to Jackson and Wood (2018), anxiety reduction during sports contest has been linked to engagement in religion/spiritual activities. Kučič and Spehnyak (2015) asserted that most athletes depend more on religion/spiritual activities to reduce the stress and anxiety that accompany sport performance. In their study, Azimirad and Jalilvand (2012) finds out that athletes with higher score of spirituality have a lower level of sport contest anxiety. An athlete's performance with an unexpected situation (including anxiety and stress) during contest, most athletes depend on religion and spiritual activities to gain stability. This substantiates the findings of Najah et al. (2017) who noted that athletes with higher religion/ spirituality and prayer lifestyle have the capacity to cope with anxiety compared with those with lower level religion/ spirituality and prayer lifestyle.

### PREVENTION OF RISKY BEHAVIOR

An athlete's performance comes with various risky behaviours which are difficult to avoid most times. Shamsaei and Ahmadian (2020) observed that religious beliefs constrain athletes from engaging in doping behaviour. This is ultimately important to the health of the athletes towards achieving peak performance. Evans & Petersen (2015) indicated that religiosity could facilitate the prevention of risky behaviours such as alcohol drinking or performance enhancing drug usage among athletes while Moore, et al. (2011) pointed out that student-athlete who upholds religious beliefs will experience lower alcohol consumption and not indulge in sexual misbehaviour.

Dana and Sabzi (2013) opined that religiosity can lead to behavioral transformation among athletes. It is observed that most religious athletes avoid tempting lifestyles that can be detrimental to their performance (Rial, 2012). In her interviews with Brazilian elite football players in top flight football leagues around the world, Rial found out that many of these athletes who engaged in religion/spiritual practices experienced transformation of character/behavior i.e. from being a drunkard, a drug addict, a womanizer, among others, to becoming good persons with improved personalities which helped them to succeed as footballers.

### CONCLUSION

The reviewed studies have shown that religiosity/ spirituality and sports are two important social phenomena that play prominent roles in today's contemporary society. The studies has also substantiated that there is a relationship between sports and religion and this has been influenced by the popularity of Pentecostalism and charismatic Christianity among sub-Saharan Africans. Most athletes, who are very religious and spiritual while engaging in sports, seek secular goals such performance enhancement, coping optimally with stress and anxiety, maintaining safety, playing at their best ability, and being in good health physically and mentally, among others.

It has been asserted that religiosity/ spirituality influences athletes' performance through enabling performance enhancement, success/victory, and reduction of anxiety/stress and prevention of risky behaviour.

Prayers have been pointed out as the most commonly used resource of religiosity/ spirituality by athletes. Nevertheless, athletes and coaches should not misuse prayers, praying to enhance performance is one thing, but praying for victory can indicate praying for failure for your opponent.

### SUGGESTIONS

Based on the studies reviewed, this paper is suggesting that:

In order to achieve set goals during a sporting contest, athletes, coaches, managers and sport psychologists and parents should appropriately distinguish between upholding religious and spiritual convictions in sports and adequately preparing for sports contest so as not to misuse religiosity/ spirituality towards enhancing performance.

Sports administrators, managers, coaches, sports psychologists and athletes should consider using religion/ spiritual resources as an effective mechanism to reduce risky behaviours among athletes.



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