Striving towards Maturity: On the Relationship between Prayer and Sport

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Abstract: What should be the proper role of prayer in sport? The purpose of this article is to examine prayer and sport and to offer recommendations based on the notion of spiritual maturity. The Christian athlete, I argue, should strive towards maturity with respect to prayer, as evidenced by the fruit of the Spirit in his or her life.

Introduction

Throughout the course of human history, individuals and groups from various religious backgrounds combined sport and physical activity with acts of faith. Many ancient cultures used games in ceremonial ways, appeasing the gods in hopes of securing favorable weather conditions or increased fruitfulness. For example, the Ancient Greeks held sacred athletic contests in honor of the supreme god, Zeus. The Jicarilla Apache tribe combined physical feats with fertility rites, while the Mayans and Aztecs competed in a ball-court game loaded with religious symbolism (Guttman, 1978). This connection between religion and sport extends to Christianity as well. For example, in his letter to Timothy (2 Timothy 4:7), the Apostle Paul compared his spiritual journey to athletic contests, writing, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.”

A connection between religion and sport continues in the 21st century, most visibly in connection with prayer. High school basketball players often recite the Lord’s Prayer before taking the court. Runners bow their heads in silence before toeing the start line. Major League Baseball players perform the sign of the cross prior to stepping into the batter’s box and point to the sky after crossing the plate on a home run trot. These actions prompt some to be skeptical about the suitability of combining prayer and sport. Father Charles Riepe, president of John Carroll School in Baltimore, once told one of his basketball players to pray before the game, rather than crossing himself at the free throw line because “it looks awful when you do blow a free throw. Then it appears that God really does have it in for you and John Carroll” (Deford,
1976, p. 97). Some (e.g., Kreider, 2003) have even questioned the ethical appropriateness of praying for assistance in sport, specifically requesting aid from a higher power (i.e., God) to succeed.

For Christians involved in sport, those who reflect on the nature of sport and prayer, this raises an important question: What should be the proper role of prayer in sport? My overall purpose here is to examine prayer and sport and to offer recommendations based on the notion of spiritual maturity. The Christian athlete, I argue, should strive toward maturity with respect to prayer, as evidenced by the fruit of the Spirit in his or her life. To explain this point, I examine the nature of prayer as well as how prayer typically works in sport settings. I then move to provide a biblically normative statement for prayer in sport, an understanding based on spiritual maturity.

The Nature of Prayer

In order to determine how athletes should approach prayer in sport settings, it is imperative to understand more fully the nature of Christian prayer. My aim here is not to fully delineate the nature of prayer (that is far beyond the scope of this work), but rather to provide a working understanding that informs the rest of the paper. The very nature of prayer involves both certainty and complexity. This tension impacts how we pray on both a personal and corporate level—as an individual athlete and as a member of a team.

There are many aspects of prayer of which Christians can be certain. We derive confidence from numerous scriptural passages highlighting prayer as an integral component of the Christian walk. Jesus set the example in His life on earth, coming before God in prayer regularly. Luke 5:16 reminds us that Jesus “often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.” Prayer was part of His daily life, a way to commune with the heavenly Father. Based on Jesus’ example, it is essential that we follow this emphasis on prayer as well.

Prayer also involves certainty to the extent that we pray for specific reasons. Christians are to carry forward God’s work in the world. We do this by tapping into the very lifeblood of God. When we commune with the Almighty we indeed stand on holy ground. Jesus tells Philip, “I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father” (John 14:13). We read countless stories in Scripture where people of faith prayed and changed the world as a result, events in accordance with God’s will and overall purpose.

We also pray as a spiritual obligation; we are commanded to pray. In his final instructions to the church at Thessalonica, Paul encouraged the believers to “be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus” (1 Thessalonians 5:16–18). Jesus’
parable of the Persistent Widow serves as an additional reminder to persevere in our prayer lives (Luke 18).

Finally, we pray in order to avoid temptation. Matthew 26:41 exhorts believers: “Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak.” When we encounter thoughts of jealousy, lust, hatred, and so forth, we can rest assured that our prayers help change both our attitudes and actions.

Despite this certainty regarding prayer, there are other aspects that represent the complexity of fully understanding prayer. While believers rely on prayer, make prayer a daily part of their devotional life, and pray for individuals around the world, prayer remains a mysterious part of the faith journey. We are not entirely sure how prayer works yet we continue to pray, relying on individual and corporate experiences with prayer as well as trusting God’s promises in Scripture attesting to its importance. Part of the difficulty in understanding prayer stems from our inability to fully comprehend our relationship with God.

C.S. Lewis (1952) explains this complexity, citing a Scripture passage from the book of Philippians:

The first half is, ‘Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling’—which looks as if everything depended on us and our good actions: but the second half goes on, ‘For it is God who worketh in you’—which looks as if God did everything and we nothing. . . . And, of course, we begin by thinking it is like two men working together, so that you could say, ‘He did this and I did that.’ But this way of thinking breaks down. God is not like that. He is inside you as well as outside; even if we could understand who did what, I do not think human language could properly express it. (p. 130)

Thus, our relationship with God impacts our understanding of prayer. We pray for health and do our best to live health-conscious lives, yet one never knows when terminal cancer or a fatal accident might occur. We pray in this manner because we believe God does answer prayer and that we need to be in continuous communication with the Almighty. Lewis (1952) continues to describe when

. . . an ordinary Christian kneels down to say his prayers. He is trying to get into touch with God. But if he is a Christian, he knows that what is prompting him to pray is also God: God, so to speak, inside him. But he also knows that all his real knowledge of God comes through Christ, the man who was God—that Christ is standing beside him, helping him to
pray, praying for him. You see what is happening. God is the thing to which he is praying—the goal he is trying to reach. God is also the thing inside him which is pushing him on—the motive power. (pp. 142–143)

In addition to this difficult-to-understand relationship with God, prayer is complex in that humans approach the Almighty with a variety of motives and interests. Despite efforts to come before God with pure intentions, this is very difficult to do. Prayer may begin with a worshipful attitude and then digress into self-pity or jealousy. Foster (1992) writes that people “come to prayer with a tangled mess of motives—altruistic and selfish, merciful and hateful, loving and bitter” (p. 8). This tension of motives brought to prayer only further underscores the complexity of the issue. At times prayer may be forced and even rote. Taking part in a liturgical service, especially when one does not feel like praying, can seem disingenuous. Yet, this very act may lead to greater spiritual depth, to community with fellow believers, and may eventually bring the spiritual feelings into line. On other occasions prayer may be more spontaneous and emotionally charged. When children are severely ill, parents often pray on their behalf, pleading to God for health and healing. Upon receiving his diploma, the college graduate erupts into prayers of thanks for friends and family members, those individuals who provided support and encouragement throughout the college journey. At some points, prayer may appear selfish one-sided requests for help, desperate pleas without regard for others. During other phases of life, prayer may be offered on behalf of a friend or family member, for politicians or world events. The extent of this complexity in prayer impacts the way Christians engage in the world, including the way Christian athletes use prayer.

The Intersection of Sport and Prayer

Understanding the nature of prayer, both the certainty and complexity, helps to more fully explain the role of prayer in the lives of Christian athletes. Morris (1992) notes that many “athletes have an active spiritual life, from the mystically inclined long-distance runner to the defensive lineman belonging to the Fellowship of Christian Athletes” (p. 42). He argues that three aspects of sport actually encourage this stance. One possibility is that sport places individuals in contact with nature and their own embodiment; they may then reflect on their gifts and the Creator. Second, the concept of humility brought about by team play corresponds with a deep spiritual life. Third, through sport, athletes realize the possibility of encountering limitations. Acknowledging these limits can encourage reflection on our human frailty and the power of the Almighty.
Whenever athletic contests occur, particularly when stakes are high, the situation is ripe for acts of prayer. Athletes, fans, and coaches—all those individuals intimately concerned with the outcome—may at times offer prayers for assistance or safety or even divine presence. These individuals may utter prayers (both silent and auditory) before games (both individually and collectively), during contests (e.g., a silent prayer while lining up a putt), and after a game or race (e.g., kneeling with opponents at mid-field to offer prayers of thanks).

This subject of athlete prayers has garnered attention from both sport psychologists and sociologists. From a psychological perspective, Czech and Bullet (2007) examined intercollegiate Christian athletes and their perceptions of prayer. These individuals identified prayer as an integral component of their sport participation—both before and after competition. They found that as the stakes became higher, with performance becoming more important, athletes prayed more often and more fervently. Most of these athletes studied prayed not for victory but rather for safety, to play to their ability level, and to glorify God. Many of these college athletes were suspicious of the public prayers offered on the part of professional athletes, many of them even using the term “hypocritical” to describe the prayers, since the professional athletes may “act one way on the field and act the totally opposite way off the field” (p. 55).

Sociologists such as Coakley (2006) and Eitzen and Sage (2003) note the way Christian athletes combine religion and sport and more specifically sport and prayer. These scholars identify a number of ways Christian athletes use prayer in sport settings. At times, athletes use prayer for performance enhancement, whispering a quick plea before entering the batter’s box. These acts can be problematic, however, in that the petitioner may lack a mature, ongoing relationship with God. Perhaps the individual only approaches the Almighty in times of need, specifically as it pertains to sporting events. When faced with 4th down and 13, the quarterback, who has not darkened to doors of a church in months, suddenly turns religious and appeals to God for help.

Athletes and coaches use prayer to cope with the uncertainty always present in sport. Elite athletes in particular must contend with not only event outcomes, but also the chance of injury (as well as the corresponding loss of income or status), media pressure, and personal expectations. By praying before the games, the athletes are able to reduce their anxiety, thus allowing them to focus on the contest and ultimately perform better. Many professional teams hold weekly chapels for the players, and numerous college programs do the same. Part of the rationale for these programs is to provide support for these athletes—a tangible means to handle the myriad pressures they face (Prebish, 1984).
Others use prayer to help psyche up athletes for the contest ahead. Football teams gather in the locker room to recite a prayer before they step onto the field. This time of togetherness helps bring the athletes closer, building team unity and creating a “we” feeling, which may ultimately lead to better on-field performance. George Allen, long-time NFL coach, found nothing else worked to develop communal bonds like prayer in all of his coaching experience (Coakley, 2006). Some coaches have been more critical of this approach, however, such as former Michigan State football coach Duffy Daugherty who once remarked, “All those coaches who require pre-game prayers for their players ought to be made to attend church once each week” (as cited in Hoffman, 1985, p. 67).

Some athletes use public prayer in order to demonstrate their religious devotion to God or to “witness” as they might say. Rather than intending to keep prayer private, part of their purpose is to allow others to view these acts of faith. Green Bay Packers star Reggie White, known as the Minister of Defense, frequently led both teammates and opponents in prayer at mid-field following games. This practice, which began following a 1990 contest between the San Francisco 49ers and the New York Giants, is now a common sight in the NFL. Pat Richie, the chaplain for the 49ers, defended the practice: “I think it’s great to let people at the stadium or watching television know there’s more to your life than just football” (Walker, 1997).

Finally, some athletes have used prayer to sanctify their behaviors and the athletic contests. These individuals may be unable to identify the religious merit of competition when compared with feeding the poor or serving on the mission field. In order to feel that their profession has meaning or worth, some professional Christian athletes have decided to use their athletic talents as a way to glorify God through what they term “Praise Performances.” These athletes often give praise to Jesus Christ in post-game interviews, where a captive audience hears the athletes’ testimonies (Hoffman, 1985).

Tensions with Sport Prayers

As Christian athletes, coaches, and fans, we constantly wrestle with the appropriate manner in which to offer prayer related to sport. Let me suggest several common tensions that make this process difficult. I do not intend to fully solve these particular points of tension here, but rather to illustrate the environment in which sport prayers are offered and the difficulty of doing so in an atmosphere of maturity.

One particular aspect of tension regards for whom one should pray—for self or for others. Prayers for assistance in sport settings ask for a form of favoritism, for self at the expense of others, or the home team rather than the visitors. “Please God,” an athlete prays, “Help me get a hit to win this game.”
There is clearly a biblical precedence for this type of prayer, for example the Israelites praying for victory over their Old Testament enemies. It is not entirely clear how these prayers translate to current day sport settings, however. When a basketball player offers a pre-game prayer asking for success, is she hoping that her opponents will be a half-step slow or that they will miss most of their shots? When fans pray for their wide receiver to make the game-winning catch, are they asking that the defensive back somehow stumbles?

Yet these prayers for self bring the petitioner back to the parent-child relationship, back to the dependence Christians have on God. Humans pray, and we believe God answers. Humans ask for daily bread, and God provides. These prayers concerning self also follow theological guidelines on the scope of prayer. For example, Philippians 4:6 states, “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.” Surely it is biblical then to pray for assistance, and perhaps even victory, if that is what we seek through competition. But this apparent tension is followed by yet another.

Another tension point involves the subject matter of prayer. The outcome of an athletic contest, even one as dramatic and monumental as the Super Bowl or World Series, pales in comparison with the ultimate importance of global poverty, AIDS, or natural disasters. Jesus’ words to the disciples were to “take care of the poor” rather than building up treasures for themselves. How can we possibly justify the billions of dollars spent on sport per year—money that could be spent towards more “spiritual” pressing needs? From this line of thought one might conclude that sport is not a worthy subject of prayer and is, at best, a trivial part of the Christian life.

A third tension involves the extent to which God intervenes in human life. Many believe that since sport is a trivial aspect of life, God would not intervene in athletic contests. For example, legendary football coach Knute Rockne (2007) once quipped, “I’ve found that prayers work best when you have big players.” Many believe sport ranks low on heavenly priorities when gauged against hunger, poverty, illness, war, and so forth. Put another way, Easterbrook (2001) reasons, “Whether God intervenes in daily life is a complicated question in theology. But supposing there is a divine influence in events, God help us, as it were, if it’s used up on home runs and touchdown passes.” Richard Wood, a Methodist and Quaker minister, argues, “To suggest . . . that God has a direct involvement in athletic contests trivializes the whole notion of God’s involvement with the world. It is a heresy” (as cited in Nack, 1998).

Others counter that miracles do indeed occur, that they happen in sport at times, and that we need only anticipate and interpret them as such (e.g., Hopsicker, 2008). Some view the following famous sporting events as examples of the miraculous: the 1980 United States Olympic hockey victory over a
heavily-favored Soviet squad forever known as the “Miracle on Ice”; the pass from Terry Bradshaw to Franco Harris that sprung forth the moniker “The Immaculate Reception”; and Doug Flutie’s “Hail Mary” pass to lead Boston College over the Miami Hurricanes (Beliefnet, 2008). Of course, that these events are labeled as “miracles” does not provide evidence that God intervened on behalf of athletes or teams. This may be more of the “miraculous” in terms of language, however, as an attempt on the part of the sportswriter to conjure up the requisite drama required to sell magazines or newspapers.

However, Christians believe God is concerned with, and present in, the very details of living, from the exhilarating to the mundane. Kathleen Norris (1998) writes, “God . . . cares so much as to desire to be present to us in everything we do” (p. 22). Presumably this means God is both present in sporting activities as well as concerned with this aspect of life. Athletes cannot bracket off, as it were, the spiritual side of life when they step onto the soccer field or into the swimming pool. After all, the psalmist (139:7–10) reminds us:

Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me; your right hand will hold me fast.

God’s presence remains with the athlete, too, from the locker room to practice field, scrimmage situation to championship contest.

A final tension point is how these prayers are interpreted by others. Athlete prayers, especially those made in public, may impact the athlete’s reputation depending on the audience interpretation. Some fans appreciate the fact that elite athletes pray publicly. These fans view the athletes as spiritual champions who are bringing their faith to sport. Christian sport periodicals trumpet the faith—and success—of elite Christian athletes. Others view these public prayers as either distasteful, hypocritical, or dismiss them as merely part of the overall sport culture. When these fans witness Christian athletes praying for victory or celebrate achievements with prayer especially in public ways, the athlete’s reputation falters, at least in the eyes of these fans. These athletes may be accused of lacking integrity in that their prayers may appear hollow or ritualistic. Hoffman (1985) notes that for some athletes, prayer is more likely to serve as a good-luck charm rather than a true act of devotion. Part of the issue involves the interpretation on the part of the individual and also how the prayers are conducted. This reading is impacted by how the athlete lives her faith—are the prayers genuine and part of an ongoing relationship with God?
On Maturity, Prayer, and Sport

Given the complex nature of prayer, the manner in which prayer typically occurs in sport settings, and the aforementioned tensions when combining prayer with sport, I want to conclude by offering several recommendations focused around the theme of maturity. As Christians, we are called into a growing relationship with God, becoming more and more like Christ in our thoughts and actions. This growth impacts not only our vertical relationship with God, but also our horizontal relationship with other humans—our family, friends, neighbors, and even enemies. This gradual movement towards maturity influences how we pray as well as the focus of our prayers.

God calls us to move beyond the infant stage of salvation towards a mature relationship. In Hebrews 5:13–14, we read, “Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.” As we move towards maturity, our lives embody the “fruit of the Spirit”: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22–23). The more Christ-like we become, the more these qualities appear in our lives on a daily basis. Without a mature faith, we risk being “tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming” (Ephesians 4:14). We grow and develop through the spiritual disciplines (e.g., prayer, fasting, communion) and through our contact with other believers in community. This growth brings about changes in our attitudes, actions, and the way people perceive us.

Mature prayer considers God’s purpose—a broad understanding of humanity and breadth of life. Those viewing sport through a mature lens realize that God cares not only about Super Bowl champions and Division I football players, but also youth sport benchwarmers as well as soccer moms and dads. This breadth of life includes the winning and losing, friendship amidst competition, pain and joy, the striving and finishing. Theologian Karl Barth (1985) says, “All our entreaties presuppose that we ask to participate in God’s cause. . . . We must have ground on which to walk. . . . We must not be surprised that many prayers resound in a void and that they are neither listened to nor answered” (pp. 48–49). Prayers offered in a mature vein reflect this broad understanding, seeking to take part in God’s spiritual work on earth.

This mature prayer relationship develops into fellowship and communion rather than manipulation or magical requests. Renowned scientist Francis Collins (as cited in Horgan, 2007) notes that prayer is “not a way to manipulate God into doing what we want him to do. Prayer . . . is much more a sense of trying to get into fellowship with God. I’m trying to figure out what
I should be doing rather than telling Almighty God what he should be doing. Look at the Lord’s Prayer. It says, ‘Thy will be done.’ It wasn’t ‘Our Father who art in Heaven, please get me a parking space’ (p. 34). Rather than spending time solely focused on requests, mature prayers include times of reflection, meditation, silence, and even listening. The focus changes dramatically in this way, moving from one-sided pleas for help to developing a deepening relationship with Christ. At its heart, mature prayer involves spending time with God, both in conversation as well as silence. Rather than prayer as only a one-sided form of communication—humans praying and God listening—there comes a point where individuals are content to be in close proximity with the Almighty. To illustrate, Montapert (1986) writes, “One day my wife came to my study. She tiptoed in and sat down. I finally looked up and asked, ‘What do you want, dear?’ ‘Oh, nothing’ she said. ‘I just wanted to be where you are’” (p. 54). This is true of the human relationship with God as well—dwelling in the presence of this transcendent being.

When athletes pray for victory they are, in effect, asking that God join their side. This raises a number of questions including what happens when opposing teams or individuals both pray to God for assistance? Or, when fans pray for their favorite player to hit a home run are they, in the same breath, pleading for the pitcher to serve up a “fat one”? This seems to be quite different from prayer grounded in a mature, reflective relationship. Jim Wallis (2005) points out,

> Abraham Lincoln had it right. Our task should not be to invoke religion and the name of God by claiming God’s blessing and . . . saying, in effect, that God is on our side. Rather, Lincoln said, we should pray and worry earnestly whether we are on God’s side (p. xiv). If we pray in this manner, we might encounter a number of things such as penitence and even repentance, humility, reflection, and even accountability (p. xiv).

This charge to “pray and worry earnestly” about praying for victory is both timely and worth considering.

In this time of scandal—the Tour de France rocked by blood doping, Major League Baseball wrestling with the Mitchell Report’s list of players linked to steroids and other performance-enhancing drugs, and investigations of the age of the Chinese gymnastic team—the sporting world could benefit from individuals who took seriously this admonition from Wallis. Sport does not require a humble attitude, but athletes who demonstrate this virtue offer hope that it is possible to participate in sport without egotistical attitudes. Christian athletes in particular might deepen their own spiritual walk without alienating the broader culture if they worked more toward this attitude of reflection and humility in their prayer life. Jesus has harsh words,
after all, for the Pharisees who pray in public, reminding His followers, “But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you” (Matthew 6:6). While this passage need not be taken literally as an argument against pre-game prayer or public, on-field, post-game prayer, it does serve as a helpful reminder about the proper attitude required.

This comprehension of both God and humanity impacts how and for what people pray. Sporting prayers with a mature understanding of God and a well-developed relationship with the Almighty might sound more like this: “God, thank you for the gift of life and for the chance to compete in this race. Help me to use my gifts to their fullest potential, and keep me and the rest of my competitors safe from injury. Amen.” Prayers may still contain a certain amount of self-regard, asking for one’s daily bread so to speak, but this self-regard is in the context of an understanding of one’s place within God’s world.

Combining sport and prayer in meaningful ways requires a great deal of thought and reflection. It is the way one aligns with a greater source of insight and power and is part of an ongoing relationship between humans and God, our opportunity to acknowledge our incomplete nature, our weakness, and need to God. Further, prayer is a complex relationship between humans and the Almighty that is integral to a believer’s sense of meaning and identity. Sport adherents who value faith can be encouraged to approach prayer maturely, as part of a deepening spiritual relationship.

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1 All biblical references, unless otherwise stated, are from the New International Version.

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