NO PAIN, NO GAIN: PAIN AND RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE IN SPORTS

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ABSTRACT

Brice T. Jenkins: No Pain, No Gain: Pain and Religious Experience in Sports
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This project explores pain as a tool for achieving an experience which could possibly be identified as “religious.” Because sports require strenuous physical and mental activity from an athlete, it becomes an endeavor often rooted in pain. However, for some athletes, and especially for the champion, this pain can become a constructive tool with which to achieve victory and human excellence. Like the Medieval Christian mystic, who might have viewed physical and spiritual suffering as an avenue to unity with God, physical and mental suffering in the same way becomes a transformative agent in the life of the athlete, cultivating the body and competitive spirit in order to win. When framed under the pretense that sports can function religiously for an athlete, by constructing sacred elements, inspiring a unique world-view, and demanding a particular behavior and ascetic mode of living, one’s experience in sports appears wholly similar to that of the religious realm. This connection is even more evident in the neurological studies of athletes and shamans, whose “transcendent” experiences can both be linked to endorphin production in the brain.
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I feel though that I am ultimately indebted to the UNC Men’s Crew for giving me the amazing opportunity to participate in competitive rowing. After four years on the team, I can honestly say that I have changed both physically and mentally, developing better athletic and academic discipline. Many of the themes of this project are inspired by my own experiences while on the team. And as an individual who did not wholly devote myself to sports before college, I can honestly say this has been a life-changing experience and an important part of my own religious experience.
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Introduction

“We must hurt in order to grow, fail in order to know, and lose in order to gain. Because some lessons in life are best learned through pain.” – Anonymous

“Despite burning lungs and muscles that said no more, we kept pushing upstream. Don’t take No for an answer. Years later, I learned that elite rowers had these same feelings—lungs on fire, muscles saying we must stop now—only they experienced these sensations at higher boat speeds. The pain is always there, waiting for us at the perimeter of our capacities, wherever that horizon may fall. Yet, steadily pushing through that pain gradually expands those capacities.”¹

In this quote from Mind Over Water, Craig Lambert offers us an unusual view of pain. It is as if he is engaged in a battle between his mind and body as he silences those thoughts and feelings which tempt him to stop. Yet rather than ceasing the activity which causes him suffering, Lambert instead decides to push through the pain, believing his physical endurance will improve because of it. For in the end, he is wholly concerned with pushing the limits of his abilities further and further.

Though it is strange, this notion is critical to the world of sports. Rather than being damaging, pain instead serves as a valuable tool for many athletes. This aspect, however, is not unique to sports alone. It is quite common in religion as well, where physical and spiritual sufferings sometimes serve positive roles by healing and strengthening the soul. In this way, the presence of pain in sports and religion can be strikingly similar. This project therefore seeks to investigate this likeness, showing that pain can serve as a tool for achieving an experience in sports that can perhaps be considered religious.

To illustrate this point, I will first compare sports and religion on a functional level by analyzing how both realms possess sacred objects and places which authoritatively force athletes and believers into certain modes of living. Next I will explore different types of non-injurious pain that exist in sports, noting their physiological causes, how environmental stimuli either cause or magnify them, and finally how athletes react to this suffering. Such types of pain can become a critical asset to the success of an athlete. Following on this idea, I will then go on to describe how pain is used constructively in the lives of certain Medieval Christian mystics who also viewed pain as an indispensable instrument for spiritual growth. Finally, the last section of this project will relate these uses of pain, concluding with a comparison between transcendent experiences both in sports and religion, which display a considerable biological resemblance.

Pain thus links sports and religion in an interesting way: it is necessary for enhancing a particular experience, whether in the moment or in the long term. While I will not argue that sport is religion, it is important to open our minds to those other perhaps “normal” aspects of life which might qualify as religion. As both are rooted in human experience and activity, it is worth exploring the ways in which sports and religion can improve quality of existence and how pain works to improve that existence.

This concept of pain being a positive agent is rather bizarre because pain is a word that normally has an undesirable connotation. Just by reading it, you are compelled to summon negative emotions, past memories, and even fear. This is because when we as humans think of pain, it is often conceived as a product of harm. The first two definitions in the Merriam-Webster dictionary define the word as “(1) the physical feeling caused by disease, injury, or something that hurts the body,” and “(2) mental or emotional suffering: sadness caused by some emotional or mental problem.” The nature of pain is both physical and mental; it is seen as
threatening, wounding, and destructive. In *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry characterizes this concept best when she identifies pain as the “unmaking” of the world. Using torture and war as the two most prominent examples of pain-causing phenomena, Scarry shows how physical suffering can possess a world-deconstructing effect by reducing language and consciousness. In these contexts, pain can also become objectified by the environment in which it is caused. Even common worldly items (like a room or a refrigerator) can become associated with pain by a torturer if they were once used as weapons against him.

In this way, pain and suffering are also isolating. An individual’s pain becomes entirely their own, for it is not accessible to others, exists within their own mental and somatic systems, and can be experienced to a degree unique to one’s own tolerance. As Scarry notes, “two people can be in a room together, the one in pain, [and] the other either partially or wholly unaware of the first person’s pain.” Therefore pain is not a direct object of external perception but only internal sensation.

But while negative views seem to dominate our conceptions of pain, physical and mental pain can also play a valuable role. Scarry describes this quality in the second part of her book, where she characterizes the constructive aspect of pain. In a very telling example, she describes how the cross in the Christian tradition, a devise used for killing, becomes the centerpiece of the religion. The weapon utilized to crucify Jesus Christ became seen as the tool for humanity’s salvation. Christ’s pain was understood as redeeming humanity’s sins. In *The Modulated* 

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3 Ibid., 39-41.

4 Ibid., 12.

5 Ibid., 213-214.
Scream, Esther Cohen explores this weapon-turned-tool feature of pain in late Medieval culture, stating, “Certainly, there were attempts to vanquish pain, but the most common attitude, in practical terms, was to make use of it.”

Craig Lambert, in the opening example, exemplifies this constructive aspect of pain and expresses the inevitability of suffering in the experience of sport. Struggle is unavoidable when one engages in athletic activity and competition. This is because activity involves physical exertion. To run forward, shoot basketballs, kick soccer balls, or perform acrobatic moves in gymnastics, an athlete must utilize body mechanics, energy, and power in order to complete these particular tasks. Physical exertion over a period of time coupled with a given level of sustained intensity biologically leads to a loss of force output. However, sports are not limited to physical pain but psychological exertion as well. Coping with the pressure of competition, dread of the physical pain to come, and even a process called central nervous system fatigue, can lead to physical and psychological doubt and exhaustion.

In many ways, pain is central to religion as well. Many traditions preach a fallen state of humanity, whereas the nature of the material world is bound to evil and suffering. Charles Spurgeon, a nineteenth century British Christian theologian, characterized life as a battle, a spiritual warfare with the world, the flesh, and the devil. The first of the four noble truths of Buddhist philosophy says that life essentially consists of suffering. Pain, loss, and hardship are universal human experiences, so it is reasonable that religions would seek to explain these

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phenomena. But as noted above, there are many religious individuals and traditions that have regarded pain as a tool for spiritual clarity and unity with the divine. In many instances, pain became a necessity for transcendent experience, which Louis Roy defines as “an apprehension of the infinite through feeling, in a particular circumstance.”

Can pain serve as a catalyst for transcendent experiences in sports? Is it possible for an athlete to have an experience which “goes beyond the limits of ‘normal’ life” due to the pain that he or she endures? Common experiences such as the “runner’s high” suggest that this is indeed possible, or at least these experiences are commonly perceived in this way. In many respects, the neurological aspects of the runner’s high are very similar to those of religious experiences such as shamanistic trances.

The idea that pain can be viewed and used constructively is often foreign to us. However, it is a mindset that is crucial to this study. Both the believer and the athlete either voluntarily or involuntarily undergo pain in the pursuit of physical and/or spiritual development. The athlete who trains in order to progress might view pain as an obstacle, but one that is directly translatable to success. The religious mystic who accepts pain in order to achieve greater spiritual discernment obviously does not see pain as a barrier or burden, but rather as an avenue for unity with the divine. Both are positive applications and possess a transforming quality.

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10 Ibid.
The Sacred and the Profane—The Nature of Sports

“Now he says to you: Come now to the contest, show us what you have learned, how you have practiced the athletic art. How long will you be exercised alone? Now is the opportunity for you to learn whether you are an athlete worthy of victory, or one of those who go about the world and are defeated.” – Epictetus

From an outside perspective, sports might appear to be the frivolities of physically gifted individuals. If a person was asked to characterize their conception of sports, they might respond with “games” or “exercise activities.” These simple descriptions might hold true if athletics were simply a hobby for every individual. But for those who devote themselves to athletic success, these words fail to capture the real complexities of sports and competition. What then is sport exactly? For the purposes of this project, sport will be defined as a pursuit of victory and excellence, whether over internal or external goals and opponents, through activity involving physical and mental work and skill. This can be individual or team activity, but most importantly it is activity done in the quest for satisfactory completion of a given physical task.

I wish to move away from the concept of sport as a leisure activity and move towards an understanding of sports as something closer to “athletics,” a term that comes from the Greek word ἄθλος (athlos) meaning “a contest for a prize.”11 This is because I believe the contest or struggle of sports is its most defining quality.12 Some examples of sports are rather formalized contests between opposing bodies, such as football, basketball, or wrestling. Other more individual activities, such as running or weightlifting, can also face an opponent, but one that is

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12 For a valuable analysis of the paradigmatic form of sport, including an explanation regarding competition as one of its critical features, consult Jan Boxill’s “Introduction: The Moral Significance of Sport” in Sport Ethics: An Anthology (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2003), edited by Jan Boxill.
embodied in the form of personal goals or external standards. Either way, it is evident that individuals are engaged in physical and mental struggle against an opposing force.

Sports are thus a kind of outlet for a human’s competitive instinct. It is almost primal in a way, a compulsion to achieve victory at all costs. Often the will to win goes beyond simple mental decision. People often talk about the “competitive spirit,” or “the heart of a champion” when characterizing this innate desire for victory. As Andrew Bernstein, a philosophy professor at Marist College, has stated, “It’s a spiritual thing…It’s in someone’s moral character—some indefatigable quality that a person has that they’re not going to be denied.”

It would seem then that the athletic lifestyle is geared towards nurturing this inner athletic spirit. On the field, in the gym, or at the boathouse, athletes are sequestered off, made to put aside daily life and focus solely on one goal: improvement. This improvement, of course, is necessary to win, like an offering made through sacrifice of time and effort that will somehow bring the athlete closer to the divine that is victory. And this glory comes through official ceremonies, competitions where those who have offered the most will achieve excellence. While this metaphor rather deliberately frames sports in religious language, the similarity is rather striking in its structure, function, and experience. There is quite a bit of scholarly literature that associates sport with civil religion, investigating the effect of sports on viewers and their experiences. But the aim of this project is to analyze the experience of athletes themselves. The task here is not to assert that sports are a religion, for that would in effect be defining religion itself, which ultimately is an impossible task. Instead, I wish to look at how sports and religion function in the lives of individuals and bring to light the most interesting parallels between these different realms.

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Thus this section compares sports and religion in relation to some of their greatest functional characteristics. These include the presence of the sacred, the separation of sacred and profane (natural or every-day) space, social and ascetic practice, and ethics and morality. Here I seek to widen the scope of what might qualify as religious feelings and experiences.

*Conceptions of the Sacred in Sports*

Perhaps the most important parallel between sports and religion is the presence of the sacred. It would generally be regarded, in the context of religion, that temples, churches, shrines, and other objects such as relics are seen as sacred by those who observe various religious traditions. But what does it mean for these items and environments to be sacred? To answer this question, we will explore several theoretical perspectives on the issue that suggest that sacredness is an object of human projection. Whether this element of sacredness or holiness is truly external is not important here, but rather its social function is the matter of investigation. Therefore we will first consult Emile Durkheim’s theory of the totemic principle of religion. Durkheim’s sociological explanation for sacredness is compelling, but before explaining this theory, it should be framed in the wider context of his scholarly project.

In his book, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim essentially wants to investigate and explain the earliest form of religious life in order to describe its most basic features. His understanding of religion is rooted in the idea that religion is a social structure, the product of communal thought. Like society, religion has developed layers throughout time and space and has become difficult to analyze homogenously. Therefore Durkheim traced back

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15 Ibid., 11.
to what he believed were the most rudimentary societies, as exemplified by tribes such as the Australian aborigines, to discover the most primitive religion, and thus he concludes that totemism must be the rudimentary form of religion.16

Durkheim’s sociological perspective on religion ultimately suggests that the forces of society inspire religious notions in humanity, founded in the relationships humans have with each other and objects around them. He talks about the tribal clan system and the totems that arose as representations of the clan and were passed down through family lines. But due to their use in religious ceremonies, the totems must have had a religious quality as well.17 How might this sacred character of the totem have come about? Durkheim argues that it is not the material nature of the totem that gives it its religious character, but rather its function as the embodiment of the clan, the clan’s identity, and the clan’s members. The clan, the social group itself, becomes the divine that is worshipped in the totem.18

A similar sentiment is reflected in Leonardo Boff’s The Sacraments of Life: The Life of the Sacraments. A theologian and former Catholic priest, Boff suggests that humans domesticate and become habituated to objects in the world. Due to this relationship, objects “become signs and symbols of encounter, effort, conquest, and the inner life of the human being.”19 Boff explores the nature of sacraments, extending the definition of these objects and actions beyond the seven sacraments of the Catholic Church. He suggests that something as simple as a family mug, which holds within it the enduring quality and shared experience of family drinks, moves,
and generations passing, can itself be a sacrament.\textsuperscript{20} He concludes that sacraments are created out of humanity’s relationship with the world and the sense of the divine, but ultimately he roots sacraments in human experience and behavior.\textsuperscript{21}

These projectionist ideas of religion and the sacred are quite persuasive and seem to apply to other realms as well, especially sports. Let us first place the totemic principle in a different context, namely one of collegiate affiliations. When coming to college in their first year, student athletes become a part of various sports teams: basketball, football, soccer, track and field, and others. Upon joining these teams, these individuals become part of a larger society of athletes who share common goals, abide by common rules, wear common uniforms, and undergo the same ritualistic training sessions. They essentially begin to marshal their skills under the university’s banner with a mission to make themselves and the university winners. These athletes subject themselves to the authority of coaches and ultimately the university itself, seeking to perform at the levels required of them on the team.

This respect for the university and its staff is simply part of a larger ethos, greatly contributed to by members of the non-sporting community who follow the same loyalties. The school colors, logos, buildings, and mascots all act as representations of the university. They are revered and serve as totems for the school community, sacred objects of group worship that are placed on jackets, t-shirts, uniforms, bookbags and countless other objects. As Durkheim stated, “The totem is not only a name; it is an emblem, a virtual coat of arms...”\textsuperscript{22} But these objects have no physical value that can explain their psychological ties to human beings. But just as

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 9.

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 6-7.

\textsuperscript{22} Durkheim, \textit{Elementary Forms}, 94.
Durkheim concludes about the clan totems, these collegiate icons represent the campus society itself, its students, legacy, faculty, even its ideals and aspirations to have the best academic and sports programs. As an embodiment of the collegiate society, these objects evoke powerful feelings in students, exemplified in such episodes as a sports victory over a rival school. Appendix A shows students at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill gathering together after a home-court basketball victory over Duke University. The image is a powerful depiction of ecstatic feelings as students meet on Franklin Street (the central road in the town of Chapel Hill), light fires, and sing the UNC alma mater in celebration of the university.

This is just one example of how the totemic principle functions within a particular community. In the realm of sports, totems are exemplified by objects of winning: medals, trophies, and world records. While the objects themselves are not revered for their natural value, they are desired for the values they embody, namely victory, glory, and honor. These objects become sacred because the identity of the athletes, their work and commitment, as well as the legacy of past winners are bound up in these objects and affirmed by teammates and opponents in the sporting community. What athletes perceive as external to themselves is actually a projection of their own pride, work, and values. As Durkheim states it, “Because social pressure exerts its influence mentally, it was bound to give man the idea that one or more powers exist outside him, powers both moral and forceful, that compel his submission.”23 Yet the feeling of victory is euphoric, a unity with greatness that is actualized in the successful completion of a task. Commenting on his first National Basketball Association (NBA) Championship victory, LeBron James said, “It means everything…This is a dream come true for me. I’ve been through a lot the

23 Ibid., 156-157.
last two years but this is definitely the way that it pays off.” The NBA Championship victory is the greatest honor for a basketball player, objectified in the collection of a ring.

In golf, it is the four annual major tournaments that top all the rest. Tiger Woods, regarded by many as the greatest to ever play the game of golf, is often placed behind Jack Nicklaus because of Nicklaus’s superior number of major tournament wins. Woods, who has claimed fourteen major tournament titles still falls short of Nicklaus’s eighteen. This is because major tournament victories are regarded as the pinnacle of success in golf, and the most significant totems of the sport.

Eliade, in his work The Sacred and Profane: The Nature of Religion offers compelling explanations for the sacred, especially in his theory of the division of sacred and profane space. He begins by suggesting that the world is not homogenous and is ordered by a division between sacred space and profane space. Eliade generally characterizes sacred space in five different ways: (1) it is a break from the homogeneity of profane space; sacred space provides spatial orientation in the world in the projection of a fixed point, or center; (3) it acts as a window to the divine; (4) inside sacred space there is order, or cosmos, whereas in the profane there is

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27 Ibid., 20-21.

28 Ibid., 22.

29 Ibid., 25-26, 36.
disorder, or chaos; and finally, in creating sacred space, humans are reenacting the creation of the world by the gods. Eliade’s characterizations are particularly illustrated in Exodus 3, where God appears to Moses in flame from a bush. When Moses approaches the bush, God says to him, “Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” It would seem then that “holy” signifies the presence of the divine. Eliade’s characterization, as well as Durkheim’s and Boff’s, suggests that the sacred is perceived to embody an element of the divine or its transcendent nature. Objects would therefore be considered sacred because they manifest what is sacred. An NBA Championship ring, though built with precious metals and stones, is not regarded for its inherent natural value, but rather the social significance it embodies. We shall see below that sports arenas also possess qualities of the sacred because they too embody the transcendent and divine qualities of victories, legendary players, seemingly impossible comebacks, and other awe-inspiring moments in sports history.

It seems that in the world of sports, as in religion, there are functionally sacred elements. This can be attributed to particular locations, objects, even people and their deeds. The aim of this section is by no means to discount the validity of belief in external beings, but to show that sacredness has a side that is formulated through human relationship and experience. In the world of sports, sacredness is human achievement. Perhaps one might characterize victory as one supreme divine of sports, an embodiment of excellence mediated by objects and environments that are so coveted and revered.

30 Ibid., 29-32.
31 Ibid., 34.
32 Exodus 3:1-6 (NRSV).
33 Mircea Eliade, The Sacred and the Profane, 11-12.
Athletic Asceticism

The drive to pursue physical achievement undoubtedly forces an athlete to lead a lifestyle that is different from the world around them. This helps to increase an athlete’s focus on the task at hand and adopt practices that can optimize their performance and progression. The ancient Greek philosopher Epictetus, when describing what it took to compete at the Olympic Games, stated:

But consider what precedes and follows, and then, if it is for your advantage, engage in the affair. You must conform to rules, submit to a diet, refrain from dainties; exercise your body, whether you choose it or not, at a stated hour, in heat and cold; you must drink no cold water, nor sometimes even wine. In a word, you must give yourself up to your master, as to a physician.\(^\text{34}\)

This distancing from normal life, the denial of vain pleasures, and restrictions on behavior and diet are all elements of practice that are very similar to the behavior of a religious ascetic.

The term “asceticism” itself comes from the Greek ἄσκησις (askesis), which originally had a meaning attributed to athletic training. William Harmless discusses this idea of training and conditioning as it existed in the ascetic lifestyle of a fourth-century Christian monk whose life is described in The Life of Antony. He notes that Antony was a figure who adopted a physically demanding lifestyle of manual labor, vigorous prayer, harsh living conditions, and a strict diet of at most one meal a day consisting of bread, salt, and water.\(^\text{35}\) Antony’s lifestyle undoubtedly had a teleological aspect, as his spiritual goals demanded a stringent and difficult manner of living. As another example, consider a specific dietary restriction of Korean Zen Buddhists. Eating only raw foods is a common ascetic practice of monastic living, for it is

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viewed by some to decrease drowsiness and increase stamina for constant sitting. Religious asceticism is built on extreme physical methods for achieving spiritual goals. If we were to conceive of the will to win as a spiritual need, then parallels can be formulated between religious asceticism and athletic training.

Just flipping through any sports guide or manual will make it evident that, to achieve particular goals for physical improvement, an athlete must adopt certain manners of living. For example, in Running Through the Wall, Raymond Bridge offers countless examples of physical training tips as well as dietary principles to ensure improvement in the sport of running. He even describes the effects of routine fasting. He cites the example of Park Barner, an ultra-marathon runner who would fast before races in order to break various records.

A final major parallel between athletic living and religious asceticism is the concept of separation and displacement. The athletic training environment is usually sequestered off from profane life, for it often requires a set of sport-specific tools. Barbells and weights are usually required for lifting at the gym, sports like football and soccer most likely require a field, and water sports like swimming require a suitable body of water. As these are not readably accessible environments, they are set apart. This separation undoubtedly creates a unique ethos for a given place, shaped by the work that is done there. Susan Saint Sing characterized the Harvard Boathouse as a “fascinating microcosm” and an “extremely enlightening environment that rewards persistence, hard work, and teamwork.”

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boathouse, the intention is to row and do so without distractions. Often sporting environments are ones that require extreme concentration and attention in order to foster the most growth and improvement. In *Sport Psychology for Coaches*, Damon Burton and Thomas D. Raedeke state, “concentration requires quieting or ‘parking’ the mind.” This metaphorical “parking” must occur in the present and “the athlete should focus on the current task and nothing else.” This is highly similar to the church or temple, which are environments designed to inspire reverent focus.

Due to the locational and mental displacement required by sports, as well as the demand for intense physical training and particular dietary practices, it is evident that sports display an ascetic way of living. While asceticism is not universally applicable to religion, ritual practices and restrictions are common elements to most religions, forming what Clifford Geertz might describe as “conceptions of a general order of existence.” As with the religious ascetic, the athlete engages in a structured lifestyle, promoting physical conditioning for the attainment of victory.

**Ethics and Morality in Sports and Religion**

The last major parallel between sports and religion is in their systems of morality and ethics. Morality and ethics are major facets of both institutions because they affect notions of right and wrong behavior as well as relationships with other individuals. The Hebrew Bible, for example, contains a great number of laws and prohibitions that are designed to represent the covenant between God and Israel. In the same way, the NCAA and professional sports leagues contain countless rules and regulations that govern the conduct of athletes even away from the field.

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game. These rules seek to uphold the integrity of the sport and promote the well-being of its participants.

Yet beyond formal rules lies general notions of duty, honor, and commitment to excellence. While performance-enhancing drugs may offer a critical edge in one’s physical capabilities, they are prohibited and looked down upon in most sports. Short-cuts can allow anyone to complete a task more efficiently, but it is those that achieve victory within the bounds of rules who garner respect. Rules place every competitor, every individual, on the same playing field. In a way, this is the same for religion as well.

The discipline gained from such rules as well as from physical conditioning is especially character-shaping and can even extend beyond the confines of the practice environment. In her essay titled, “Creatively Sculpting the Self through the Discipline of Martial Arts Training,” Tamara Kohn shows that in the practice of Aikido, a Japanese martial art form, the training mat comes to embody the world itself. “In such reflection, the ‘small aikido’ on the mat is metonymic of the world at large. Aikido big and small, alongside other martial ways, is considered to be a life practice that is perpetually enacted, applied, remembered and developed in all moments in the serious practitioners’ life.” In this way, the lessons learned within the confines of the sporting environment can project outward onto other facets of life, which might explain why so many parents enroll their children into regular, institutionalized sporting environments. As Noel Dyck explains, “The prospect of child and youth sports inculcating habits, postures, and beliefs that are thought to embody this way of being is often touted as one of their principal benefits.”

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42 Noel Dyck, Fields of Play: An Ethnography of Children’s Sports (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 133.
The ideals and discipline of the sporting environment press upon an individual until they become regular modes of being and doing.

My aim here is to show the strong parallels between the religious and sport experience. Not only are there functionally sacred elements in the athletic realm, but sports have a distinct authority over the structure of an athlete’s life and behavior. That degree of devotion and submission suggests that sports can function religiously for an athlete. Robert Araya, in this essay “Running into a Revelation,” stated that “I have also come to realize that running can give people a chance to get involved in something that benefits not only themselves, but associates them with a group of people who share and value the same ideas regarding life and how to experience it.”43 Not only did running inspire Araya’s personal view on life, but connected him with other like-minded individuals who shared similar sentiments. “Personally, running has given me a chance to really value life, which I have found to be similar to many claims of ‘religion.’”44 Because running offered significance to his life and improved his human experience, Araya likens the activity to religion. We will return to Araya concerning transcendent experiences in sports activities, but it is worth noting now that his viewpoint affirms the sports/religion connection.

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44 Ibid.
Pain in Sports

“I think people are realizing that you’re never more alive than when you’re struggling and in pain, and I think everybody knows that…” – Dean Karnazes, Ultra-marathon Runner

As discussed in the prior section, the term “sports” can cover a wide range of actions with different goals. There is also no activity in particular which, by itself, exemplifies every aspect of pain in sports. Agony and suffering undoubtedly exist in all types of athletic activity, so to illustrate the points made here, I will draw examples from many different endeavors. Endurance sports like rowing and running will be particularly useful because they expose an athlete to agonizing scenarios for prolonged periods of time.

Like the activities in which it can arise, pain can take many different forms, ultimately proving either negative (in the form of injury) or positive (in pain associated with athletic growth and progression). Negative types of pain and suffering will not be discussed here, for injury in sport is rather destructive, not only halting the athletic growth of an individual but even having the ability of ending one’s athletic career. This is not to say that injury cannot teach valuable long-term lessons. If an athlete develops an injury due to improper form, a focus on better technique could reduce future damage as well as improve performance potential. Overuse injuries that result from excessive amounts of repetitive activity are also good indicators of an athlete’s physical limits. This project, however, is concerned with pain being possibly seen as a tool for enhancing an experience. Injury does not have this capacity, especially in the short term. Therefore this section will instead look at different forms of positive and nondestructive pain, both mental and physical, as well as the different contexts in which they can arise. Since athletics and sports can also take place in different realms (whether training, testing, or competition), pain might look different when evaluated in these different contexts.
Since pain and suffering are inevitable parts of sports, they have a crucial effect on the way in which athletes approach exercise, personal growth, and contests. Athletes spend countless hours in training in order to overcome the power of pain and to build mental and physical tolerance to it. And, it is through pain that an athlete discovers internal motivations and gains physical and mental maturity. While the fourth section below will consider the transcendent quality of sports, it is worth noting now that pain and suffering in exercise can have amazing transformative effects.

The “Good” Pain in Sports

I will begin by exploring common types of positive, or “good,” pain. Non-injurious pain and suffering is not only physical, but can be mental and psychological as well. This section will consider different types of pain in sports and how they fit into these categories.

Perhaps the most common form of non-injurious pain or suffering that exists in athletics is fatigue. Fatigue might be defined as a loss of force and power output leading to reduced performance of a given task.\(^45\) It is a biological safety measure, preventing metabolic disaster, as well as preventing injury and preservation of muscle and tissue.\(^46\) Exercise fatigue can be caused by the interplay of numerous internal biological factors as well as other factors such as intensity and mode of exercise, the environment, and the athlete’s nutrition.\(^47\) Scientists have commonly focused on two locations for fatigue. The first is central fatigue, or that which “involves


\(^{46}\) Terry McMorris *et al.*, “Fatigue and Limits to Human Performance,” *Exercise and Cognitive Function* (Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2009), 137.

mechanisms within the brain and spinal cord.” The second type is peripheral fatigue, which “includes the motor neuron and the muscle fiber.”

While studies continue to investigate the role of central fatigue in exercise, Donald T. Kirkendall suggests that it indeed takes place. Kirkendall notes that central nervous system (CNS) fatigue is often “set aside as psychologic factors such as inadequate motivation, lack of attention, effort perception, and pain.” And he states that increased perceived effort (how hard you feel your body is working) is the first clue that muscles cannot hold a desired power output, rather than reduction in force output. Thus neuropsychologic mechanisms must be considered. By studying patients who have chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS), it was discovered that these CFS patients had a normal cardiovascular response to graded exercise, but experienced higher levels of perceived effort. It was noted that most of these patients, when motivated appropriately, experienced similar factors of peripheral fatigue as normal patients, but experienced a higher perception of effort. Therefore central fatigue is an obstacle that an athlete must face when exercising, since the activity at hand will gradually become perceived as more difficult even if the body can adequately perform the task.

Like central fatigue, peripheral fatigue can be attributed to many different factors. One major cause of fatigue is an increase in energy consumption. During exercise the body needs and uses much more energy than when at rest. The main source of fuel for muscles during

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49 Ibid.


51 Kirkendall, “Fatigue from Voluntary Motor Activity,” 97-98.

52 Ibid., 98.
moderate to intense aerobic exercise as well as during higher intensity intervals is muscle glycogen. While a body in exercise will use other stores of energy, such as blood glucose, glycogen is the preferred source. Therefore, as muscle glycogen depletes during exercise, fatigue occurs.\textsuperscript{53}

If exercise is of lower intensity, the body utilizes aerobic metabolism for energy. However, during high-intensity exercise this energy consumption could potentially “exceed the aerobic capacity of the cells” and the body then relies on anaerobic metabolism.\textsuperscript{54} This results in lactate formation, or what athletes might call the notorious “lactic burn.” When an athlete partakes in “maximal exercise,” this lactic acid concentration can increase greatly. This results in a greater acidity of both muscle and blood. The increased acidity is buffered to a degree, but not fully, and the result of the excess lactic acid accumulation is a hindrance in adenosine triphosphate (ATP) production.\textsuperscript{55} Of the high-energy compounds which cells contain, ATP is the most important.\textsuperscript{56}

Though excess lactic acid will be used for recovery purposes upon completion of exercise, the feeling it produces during a workout can become quite excruciating. If exercise becomes so intense that the supply of oxygen for ATP production is insufficient, then muscles will rely more on their anaerobic system for energy, thus causing even more lactic acid buildup.\textsuperscript{57} Athletes often talk about the resulting intense burn in vivid fashion. A rower, characterizing his

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\textsuperscript{56} William D. McArdle, Frank I. Katch, and Victor L. Katch, \textit{Exercise Physiology: Energy, Nutrition, and Human Performance} (Philadelphia: Lippincott Williams & Wilkins, 2007), 139.

\textsuperscript{57} Abernethy \textit{et al.}, \textit{Foundations of Human Movement}, 128.
experience during a two-kilometer test\textsuperscript{58} on the rowing-machine, wrote, “No matter how hard I drove my burning legs the machine readout stared back impassively…” After the test he claimed, “Finally I collapsed off the machine, lungs gasping for more air, legs screaming with lactic acid.”\textsuperscript{59}

Another common physical pain associated with exercise is muscles soreness. Muscle soreness is the immediate feeling of pain following participation in exercise and is classified as a type I muscle strain. This can be experienced in the form of stiffness, aching pain, and/or tenderness of the muscle typically experienced for only hours post-activity. This is different from delayed onset muscle soreness (DOMS), which afflicts the athlete about twenty-four hours after exercise. DOMS will reach its peak at around seventy-two hours after exercise and improve in five to seven days. Immediate soreness and DOMS are the result of damage taking place to muscle cells during exercise, which the body responds with inflammation in the area. Inflammation most often takes place after exercise that is unfamiliar and results in muscle weakness and a decline in performance until recovery has taken place.\textsuperscript{60} But the damage that occurs and its subsequent recovery are necessary for increase in athletic performance, strength, and size.\textsuperscript{61}

This overview of different types of pain shows that athletes are undergoing a physical and mental change that can be directly attributed to work output. Pain and fatigue are inevitable.

\textsuperscript{58}The 2000m rowing machine (erg) test has been a standard fitness test for rowers since the invention of the rowing machine. This is due to the fact that sprint races on the water are also 2000m. The goal of every rower during one of these tests is to pull 2000m in the fastest time possible.

\textsuperscript{59}David and James Livingston, \textit{Blood Over Water} (New York: Bloomsbury, 2010), 35.


\textsuperscript{61}Scott Lynn Burket, “The Relationship of Strength Gain to Delayed Onset Muscle Soreness” (Ed.D. diss., University of Arkansas, 1991), 72.
While certain measures can be taken by the athlete to reduce the onset of fatigue, it is impossible to prevent it entirely. As was indicated above, fatigue is essentially a mind-body relationship. And fatigue is also traditionally divided into three categories: subjective fatigue, objective fatigue, and physiological fatigue.\(^{62}\) Subjective fatigue represents an “experience, awareness, or feeling,” objective fatigue refers to “that which is epitomized in the study of work output,” and physiological fatigue means “the change in certain body process when performing a task.”\(^{63}\) As we have seen, not only are there bodily processes that limit sustained power output, but the mind sees the change as discomfort, and perceived effort increases. What results is a reluctance to complete the task at hand and an alteration in mood and motivation.\(^{64}\)

Athletes thus have the capacity to suffer mentally as well. This suffering might be due to the mind reacting to physical pains or because of anticipation of the pain to come, nervousness and fear about a particular task, or even the experience of defeat. These examples might fit into what is termed “competitive anxiety.” Competitive anxiety can be defined as “the tendency to become anxious and worried about failure in sport.”\(^{65}\) Anxiety in general is subdivided into *trait anxiety* (in which personality features are predisposed to seeing certain environmental factors as threatening) and *state anxiety* (the emotional state of fear and apprehension along with physical arousal).\(^{66}\)

There are elements in competition that might then be perceived as threatening. The environmental demand on an athlete, or the “objective” demand, is commonly identified by

\(^{62}\) McMorris et al, “Fatigue and Limits,” 137.

\(^{63}\) Ibid.

\(^{64}\) Ibid.


\(^{66}\) Ibid., 27.
scholars as the objective competitive situation (OCS). “The OCS specifies the type of task, the
difficulty of opponents, the playing conditions and playing rules, and the available extrinsic
rewards.”67 Such demands are determined by what an athlete must do in order to achieve a
satisfactory outcome when compared with a given standard of performance, whether that be an
opponent, an ideal performance, or previous personal achievement.68 How the athlete processes
the OCS is called the “subjective competitive situation” (SCS), and the athletes’ anxiety response
can be manifested on three different levels: behavioral responses, physiological responses, and
psychological responses. This variation is largely due to an athlete’s competitive trait anxiety,
which determines whether aspects of the OCS are perceived as a threat.69

Training and Competition

Comprehending the science behind the pain one experiences when exercising is crucial to
understanding the mind of the athlete. Pain and effort are elements every athlete has to deal with
before even beginning exercise. Physical and mental pain is directly relatable to both the action
of exercise and the environment in which it takes place. This section will explore the different
environments of sporting activity, showing how the pain profiles that were discussed above
generally fit into the lifestyle of an athlete.

There are two main arenas of sport: training, where athletes hone their sport-specific
skills, improve physical fitness, and test their athletic capabilities, and then competition, where
athletes use their abilities against other opponents in a more organized manner and setting. Most

67 Rainer Martens, Robin S. Vealey and Damon Burton, Competitive Anxiety in Sport (Champaign, IL: Human
Kinetics, 1990), 15.

68 Ibid., 15-16.

69 Ibid., 17.
sports have a specific competition season and an off-season reserved for training purposes. Training is very different from competition, as the point of training is to maximize performance potential in a contest setting. This is accomplished through the use of a training program, which consists of workouts that are utilized to more effectively accomplish specific goals (to increase the strength or size of muscles, improve sport-specific performance, increase aerobic capacity, or enhance body composition). Training programs must not only push the athlete past levels of activity they are accustomed to, but also progress in intensity and volume in order to ensure further growth as the athlete improves in ability and fitness. This concept of progressively overloading is what keeps the training program effective and difficult.

Training is not an easy process. To put it in context, Eric Murray, an Olympic and World Champion rower from New Zealand, said in an address to WestconGroup New Zealand that “For us, training really is almost harder than what we do in racing.” Eric Murray presented a video of himself performing a sixty-minute test on the indoor rowing machine in which he was responsible for pulling as many meters as possible in that time limit. Murray went on to beat the world record for that particular test length, though there was no reward for his accomplishments. While it was simply a training piece with no tangible awards, Murray still exerted himself to exhaustion, exceeding an average heart rate of 190 beats per minute for the duration of the test.

Murray shows that he and his partner, Hamish Bond, push themselves in training so that if they have to push themselves that hard in a race, they are prepared mentally and physically for

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71 Eric Murray rows in the New Zealand Men’s Pair with his partner Hamish Bond. The pair is a crew consisting of a smaller boat propelled by two rowers each responsible for their own side. Rowing one side is known as “sweeping,” whereas rowing with two oars is known as “sculling.”

the task. Bond states that he and Murray train six days a week, with two or three sessions a day, each lasting for one-and-a-half to two hours. Bond estimated that for every stroke of the two-kilometer Olympic finals race (around 240), he and Murray pulled 15,000 strokes in training over the previous four years. As is the case with most competitive sports, since competition is reduced to a limited amount of time, the task performed there is the culmination of many hours of arduous work, fatigue, and personal sacrifice.

Workouts performed in training programs might differ from the task completed in competition. For example, when Roger Bannister was training to run the first-ever sub-four minute mile, he described one particular workout where he ran ten quarter miles at sixty-six seconds each with two-minutes of rest in between. His trial leading up to the event consisted of running three-fourths of a mile rather than the mile itself in order to get a sense of the pace for the full distance. Marathon runners often train in this way, maxing 20 to 23 miles during long runs in training rather than repeatedly doing the full 26.2 miles.

Varieties of training methods all point towards a common goal: development and transformation. The phrase, “no pain, no gain” is applicable here, as it is a common saying in the sports world conveying an important perspective on training. It is frequently expected that the athlete in training should undergo pain and suffering in order to make the body grow and excel. For example, in activities which apply resistance to muscles such as weight lifting, micro-tears occur in the muscles being trained. As was described in the section above concerning muscle soreness and DOMS, recovery of these muscle fibers results in increased size and strength of the

73 Ibid.
74 Roger Bannister, First Four Minutes (London: Sportsmans Book Club, 1956), 183.
75 Ibid., 185.
muscle. The phrase “feel the burn” implies a similar notion, since the feeling of lactic acid suggests hard physiological work. The common use of these phrases points to the fact that trainers and athletes see pain as a constructive and necessary facet to the athletic lifestyle.

Due to the frequency of training, the process exposes athletes to pain and exhaustion as a normal part of the athlete’s lifestyle. But since competitions are much less frequent, there are added elements of pressure in these contexts. Location, level of opponents, and the weight of victory all play an important role in the mind of the athlete that does not usually affect them while training. Competition promises a reward of victory for winners and defeat for losers. Rewards can be both intangible (glory, honor, or fame) as well as tangible (money, trophies, or medals). The thought of such rewards and even defeat itself can be quite overwhelming and have a significant effect on the minds of athletes. In Blood Over Water, an autobiographical reflection by brothers David and James Livingston, James participates in the famed Oxford-Cambridge boat race for Cambridge. In the moments before the start of the race he recalls thinking, “I'm mortally afraid of losing and even worse, being singled out as the reason for the defeat.” For James, the thought of losing and being responsible for the loss produced a great sense of fear in him. Defeat would be a harsh sentence for him, but to be solely responsible for that loss for his teammates and university was even worse.

The prestige of the Oxford-Cambridge boat race magnified James’s anxiety. Some wins and defeats are more significant than others, simply because victory or loss in these contests carries far more weight. This “weight” can include the admiration of a larger audience, the proof of athletic ability over a certain opponent, the scale of fame associated with the victory, and even more tangible prizes in certain cases. The Summer Olympics, for example, is the highest level of

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77 Livingston, Blood Over Water, 6.
competition for sports such as wrestling, amateur boxing, and rowing. It is a world-wide event, occurring once every four years, where athletes not only bear the pride of their respective nations, but compete against the best athletes in the world. A gold medal at the Olympics is likely to be worth much more to one of these athletes than a win in a local tournament. Dr. Shane Murphy, a psychologist and professor of Psychology at Western Connecticut State University, also notes that the Olympics provide many athletes with their only chance of media exposure, since otherwise they “toil in obscurity.”

Another powerful stimulator is the venue of a competition. Certain arenas, race courses, golf courses, and stadiums carry with them an aura created by years of history and tradition. Susan Saint Sing, in her book The Wonder Crew, uses rather religious language to characterize the venue of the Royal Henley Regatta, an annual rowing race held since 1839 on the River Thames:

Rowing and its hundred years of pomp and tradition were alive and well on the sacred waters of Henley. If the 1908 Olympics did any one great thing for rowing, it established a European rivalry and an American envy. Henley and the European waters were to rowers what Wimbledon was to tennis players – the shrine. And everyone wanted to pray there.

The Royal Henley Regatta is characterized here as a spiritual center for the sport of rowing, like Wimbledon is for tennis. The Gospel According to ESPN: The Saints, Saviors, and Sinners of Sports lists more venues with this aura including Augusta National Golf Club for golf, the Indianapolis Motor Speedway (“The Brickyard”) for stock car racing, and Yankee stadium as

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one of the premiere places for baseball. These places evoke the greatness of the sports they host: legends of the game, history of great competitions, rivalries, and amazing performances. The highest levels of fame and prestige as well as prominence and tradition are concentrated on their grounds. Such environments can produce anxiety in athletes, which could have a significant effect on their athletic performance.

Harnessing the Pain

Given the various types of pain, as well as the multitude of environments in which they can occur, how do different athletes view and use pain? Can pain, while uncomfortable and sometimes disheartening, be harnessed for success? In this section, I examine relationships between athletes and their pain, noting the ways in which they overcome or use it as an advantage.

In David Halberstam’s *The Amatuers*, the reader follows the Olympic rowing pursuits of four men, all vying for a spot as the United States single-sculler in the 1984 Olympics. One of these athletes, Tiff Wood, is characterized in this way:

When he thought of rowing, the first thing that came to mind was pain. After the first twenty-five strokes of a race, his body ached. His lungs and his legs seemed to scream at him to stop. On occasion the temptation was almost irresistible. The ability to resist the impulse, to keep going in spite of it, to reach through it and summon extra resources of power while others, stronger and smoother of technique, were fading, made him a champion. But he could not think of racing without thinking of the pain. It was hard for him in advance of a race to sit and plan out what he intended to do because the very thought of racing filled him with dread of the pain.

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Wood struggles with pain and suffering not only in the midst of racing, but in anticipation of racing as well. Anxiety and fatigue are present here, and these anguishes take a toll on him. But it was Wood’s ability to fight the temptation of quitting that set him above other racers. He knew pain, and the struggle with it, was inevitable for success, especially in the sport of competitive rowing. Thus it appears that Wood uses pain constructively by working to overcome it. The sense of pain and fatigue that tempts an athlete to quit is often called the “pain barrier.”

Pushing past the pain barrier, however, is a quality of champions. “No pain, no gain” implies that the body has to experience pain in order to grow. This pain is basically a destruction of the body, but through the regenerative processes of the body, humans have the ability to grow stronger, endure longer, and become greater than before. For the athlete, this destruction of the body is often framed in a positive light, becoming a valuable ritual that is essential for physical success. Arnold Schwarzenegger, one of the greatest body-builders of all time, highlights this phenomenon:

The only way to be a champion is by going through these forced reps and the torture and pain. That’s why I call it the torture routine. Because it’s like forced torture. Torturing my body. What helps me is to think of this pain as pleasure. Pain makes me grow. Growing is what I want. Therefore, for me pain is pleasure. And so when I am experiencing pain I’m in heaven. It’s great. People suggest this is masochistic. But they’re wrong. I like pain for a particular reason. I don’t like needles stuck in my arm. But I do like the pain that is necessary to be a champion.82

Once again, Schwarzenegger displays a desire to improve that transcends his physical suffering.

Being a champion, rather than simply a competitor, brings an elevated status, perhaps even an elevated form, especially in the case of competitive body-building. But rather than simply

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overcoming pain. Schwarzenegger found enjoyment and elation through the pain he experienced in weight lifting and training. This aspect is affirmed more explicitly in the movie *Pumping Iron*, where he is quoted as even having sexual pleasure from muscular “pump,” the direct effect of increased blood flow to a working muscle during resistance training.  

Some athletes, by coming to terms with the inevitability of pain, learn to enjoy it as a reflection of hard work and achievement. As Dean Karnazes, a famed Ultra-marathon runner, indicates, this mindset is almost analgesic. “I think you just learn that if you get over the pain, you emerge with less pain.” Karnazes is no stranger to suffering, being known for amazing accomplishments in long-distance running including running 50 marathons in 50 different states in 50 consecutive days as well as running 350 continuous miles.

The inevitability of pain during athletic exercise underscores that sports are rooted in pain. Athletes are essentially engaging in a contest with their own bodies each time they commence physical activity. Since athletes are working more than while at rest, biological processes that take place within the body cause various forms of mental and physical suffering. Athletes are likely to be stricken with anxiety, exhaustion, physical discomfort, and even the agony of defeat, both in training and competition.

Why then would anyone subject themselves to this kind of torture? This physical and mental suffering has the power to break individuals, and if it is viewed as punishment, then it can become a destructive force. But through pain an athlete can achieve victory and glory. The mere thought of triumph, a sacred feeling and accomplishment, can explain why individuals

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83 *Pumping Iron*, directed by Robert Fiore and George Butler (New York: White Mountain Films, 1977), VHS.


sacrifice their body and minds regularly in sports activities. Pain acts as an avenue for transformation.
Religious Pain

“But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ’s sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed.” 1 Peter 4:13

As pain is central to the world of sports, so it has been for religious life as well. Religious suffering often functions as a transforming agent, healing the soul at the expense of the body. As in our analysis of sports, this section will explore how pain and suffering function in the religious context by considering the writings of various prominent Medieval Christian mystics. This is not to say that the way pain is used in Christian mysticism is indicative of all religious traditions, but it does offer considerable insight into the place of pain in religious experience, which is the central theme of this project.86 As Amy Hollywood states, “For medieval people, suffering was a seemingly inescapable condition of human life. By embracing that suffering—even intensifying it through ascetic practice—certain men and women shared in the redemptive suffering through which Christ would overcome the pain and sorrow of human existence.”87 Thus we will explore this notion in various medieval primary sources.

I will rely on certain patterns of pain phenomena identified by Ariel Glucklich in his book Sacred Pain. In his first chapter “Religious Ways of Hurting,” Glucklich uses religious literature to break down instances of pain into different “models” by which they can be characterized or experienced. His models are juridical, medical, military, athletic, magical,

86 Medieval Christian mystical practices also serve as a valuable parallel to the physical demand and intensity of sports. If we were to compare the physical and spiritual lifestyles of Medieval Christian mystics to those of the vast majority of modern Christian groups, it would be evident that the former were stricter than the latter. For many athletes, sports demand a rigorous lifestyle that is not questioned. An athlete does not simply skip practice if they do not feel like attending. However, the modern weekend church service has certainly evolved into a suggestion rather than a requirement for many Christian believers. It would be an interesting prospect to explore how such levels of demand affect religious devotion, especially as compared to the experience of sports.

educational, shared, and psychotropic. While these models will help to describe the different ways in which pain was utilized by Christian mystics, they will also become of further use to us when comparing the religious experience to that of sports in the next section.

**Heroic Athletic Asceticism**

In the discussion above on pain in sports, I identified a volitional aspect of pain infliction. This same notion appears in the writings of Henry Suso, a fourteenth-century German Dominican friar and Christian mystic who used various gruesome acts of self-mortification in order to achieve spiritual growth and transcendent experience. In the fourth chapter of “The Life of the Servant” from his work *The Exemplar*, Suso recounts a scene in which he etches the monogram “IHS” (representing the name of Jesus Christ) into his chest with a stylus. Compelled to do this out of an immense love for God, Suso desired to create for himself a permanent reminder of Christ’s name and suffering.

This scene is striking for several reasons. First is the experience of the etching. When Suso carved the letters into his chest, blood poured out of the wound and down his skin. However, Suso claims that “because of his burning love he enjoyed seeing this and hardly noticed the pain.” While it appears that his immense love acted like an analgesic, reducing his painful experience, it still seems that Suso actually took pleasure in the pain itself, perhaps in the way that it allowed him to share in Christ’s suffering. But as Suso goes on to note, this

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90 Ibid.
experience was not enough. While the etching was a corporeal act, Suso’s intention was for Christ to press himself on his heart, achieving a spiritual oneness with the divine.  

It seems that Suso’s experience of pain would exemplify Glucklich’s magical model, which he characterizes as either an “alchemical force” responsible for transformation from one state to another or an “agricultural metaphor” where pain is used as a tool that allows for the magical production of growth. Glucklich relates this magical model of pain to purification, describing the cleansing power of pain in some traditions, as well as the power of pain to bring an individual from “one state of life to another.” Thus, pain here has a distinct transformative ability. We especially get this sense in the last part of Suso’s chapter, where after the inscription has scarred over, Suso has a vision of light pouring from his heart. Looking at the light, he saw a beautiful golden, jewel-encrusted cross on his heart. Even trying to cover his chest, the divine light managed to glow through. In this way, it seems Suso succeeded in achieving his sanctification. The action of inscribing helped shift his interior towards the divine, and in effect become a medium of divine light. Suso believed this painful event would serve as a powerful and personal mnemonic device, but also as a purifying act.

Under this intense ascetic lifestyle, Suso underwent other self-generated acts of pain in order reach greater spiritual participation in Christ’s suffering. Perhaps one of the most vivid examples is the barbed cross he wore on his back in order to “bear on his body some sign of his heartfelt sympathy for the intense sufferings of his crucified Lord.” Building a wooden cross, Suso hammered thirty nails into it, representing Christ’s wounds and his five signs of love.

91 Ibid., 80.
92 Glucklich, Sacred Pain, 26.
94 Ibid., 88.
Describing this as his most important practice, Suso bore the cross for eight years. Twice daily, he would also strike the cross with his fist, sticking the nails further into his back and intensifying his agony.\(^{95}\) Suso’s act again served as a reminder of Christ’s suffering but also as a method of spiritual discipline. The device was not haphazardly created in order to just inflict pain, but held a deep theological meaning.

Soon, however, the cross became a tool for penitence. Suso describes a scene in which he took the hands of two girls who were presumably sitting next to him in the church congregation. Though there was no evil intent, Suso saw his behavior as shameful, and returning to his place of privacy, he threw himself onto his back with the nails stuck into his back.\(^{96}\) Suso knew that the nails in the cross would dig into, cut, and scar his body. But while in any other context this would be perceived as harm, Suso saw it as transformative. Under Glucklich’s conceptualization of pain in religion, this story would fall under the juridical model, which he characterizes as “a punishment by some personal agency…or by some impersonal mechanism such as karma.”\(^ {97}\) As Glucklich notes, penitential justice can serve a basic function: to pay for ones guilt or regret for misdeed, or to appease the anxiety of future punishment.\(^ {98}\) That is exactly the sense we gain from Suso’s writing, as the physical pain he inflicts works to facilitate his redemption, but also discipline his carnal desires.

Believing he is given the choice by God to either die from his self-mutilating acts of penitence or to give up the practices, Suso eventually chose to forgo his excessive self-mortification. But he nevertheless saw the acts as a “good beginning and a breaking of the

\(^{95}\) Ibid., 88-89.

\(^{96}\) Suso, “The Life of the Servant,” 89-90.

\(^{97}\) Glucklich, Sacred Pain, 13-14.

\(^{98}\) Ibid., 13-14,16.
undisciplined man within him." The suffering he endured for many years served as an agent for spiritual conditioning, and his religious experience was grounded in physical pain in many ways, as it is with the sports athlete. Glucklich’s athletic model is thus applicable here, and it is perhaps the most important in relation to this project. Glucklich characterizes pain in this model as a way of training the soul. He notes the example of Philo, who regarded the ascetic Jewish sect of the Essenes as “athletes of virtue.”

Suso reflects this notion again in another of his other sections, “The Little Book of Eternal Wisdom,” where the theme of “suffering out of love” is especially present. In the eighteenth chapter of this text, Suso, in the context of dialogue between himself and Christ (the eternal Wisdom), asks, “Gentle Lord, grant me and teach me by your grace to win your favor since no one can repay you for the signs of your love.” In reply, the eternal Wisdom commands a life of suffering, a shared pain in the agony of the cross. Suso stresses that as Christ suffered out of love for humanity, humans should suffer out of love for Christ. This Christian ideal is modeled in Romans 5:3-4 which states, “And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope” (NRSV). Here again, the athletic notion of suffering is manifested, but it is coupled with the parallel of spiritual endurance. The similarity here between physical and mental conditioning in sports and spiritual conditioning in religious experience is quite compelling. Both are suggested to be products of prolonged exposure to suffering.


100 Glucklich, Sacred Pain, 24-25.

Mystical Experience

The second figure I will explore is a late fourteenth to early fifteenth-century Christian mystic Julian of Norwich. Unlike Suso, Julian will give us insight into pain as a vehicle for a more “out-of-body” mystical experience.

Beginning in the first chapter of her Showings, Julian describes three desires she had of God: recollection of Christ’s passion, deathly bodily sickness, and three “wounds” (those of contrition, compassion, and longing).\(^{102}\) Already Julian is different from Suso in that she prays for divine sufferings rather than self-inflicted pains. She eventually is granted these desires, coming first in the form of a severe sickness that warrants her last rites. Undergoing paralysis, physical blindness, and asphyxiation, she experiences a painful death scene. However, Julian is induced into a vision in which she then witnesses Christ’s gruesome Passion, the Virgin Mary, and even God himself.\(^{103}\) What is striking about this text is the way in which Julian wishes to experience physical pain but also to witness Christ’s pain. Like Suso’s, Julian’s account raises the question of whether or not she felt it was possible to achieve the same divine discernment without suffering. Julian implies that it was necessary for her to be physically and spiritually challenged before receiving a vision of the Passion itself.

Julian’s perception of divine pain and suffering is captured quite interestingly by the language she uses. At the beginning of the chapter she claims, “So it seemed to me that I might with his grace have his wounds.”\(^{104}\) To experience the suffering of Christ would be a gift for Julian. This mindset is strange to us on first glance. How could physical suffering be


\(^{103}\) Ibid., 128-133.

\(^{104}\) Ibid., 129.
understood as a gift? I believe this comes down to a matter of identification. As Julian indicates later, despair (a pain of the spirit) was far greater than any of her physical afflictions. If physical agony could bring spiritual health, undoubtedly that is what Julian would choose. “Here I felt truly that I loved Christ so much more than myself that I thought it would have been a great comfort to me if my body had died.”¹⁰⁵ By identifying with the spiritual realm over the material realm, Julian’s perception of physical suffering was reduced.

In both Suso and Julian, Glucklich’s medical model is particularly useful. In describing this model, Glucklich distinguishes between how pain is characterized in modern medicine, namely as an “aversive sensation,” and its more beneficial religious function. This model, following the basic characteristics of medicine itself, uses pain as both “preventative and curative. It either cures diseases that have already been contracted (sin), or prevents ills to follow (punishment).”¹⁰⁶ Classical medicine believed that remedies should be as unpleasant as the ill itself. And if the body needed pain to cure it, then so did the soul.¹⁰⁷

**Ecstasy and Eroticism**

Now we will turn to a different model of pain as it functioned in the Christian mystical context, namely that which is involved with ecstatic or erotic experience. Glucklich classifies this type of pain under the names “psychotropics” and “ecstatic,” noting that with experiences of this type, pain goes beyond analgesic qualities and causes states of euphoria. Here I will examine the writings of Hadewijch of Antwerp, a thirteenth century Christian mystic, as well as the popular sixteenth-century figure, Saint Teresa, who also provides us with great evidence.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 142.

¹⁰⁶ Glucklich, Sacred Pain, 21.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 22-23.
concerning this model of pain. The genre of “erotic suffering” will allow us to look at a sense of pain that is mental as much as it is physical.

Let us begin by looking at text from Hadewijch’s seventh vision where spiritual or physical pain is not present, but serves as a valuable example of Hadewijch’s use of sexual themes and imagery:

With that he came in the form and clothing of a Man, as he was on the day when he gave us his Body for the first time; looking like a Human Being and a Man, wonderful, and beautiful, and with glorious face, he came to me as humbly as anyone who wholly belongs to another. Then he gave himself to me in the shape of the Sacrament, in its outward form, as the custom is; and then he gave me to drink from the chalice, in form and taste, as the custom is. After that he came himself to me, took me entirely in his arms, and pressed me to him; and all my members felt his in full felicity, in accordance with the desire of my heart and my humanity. 108

Through rather erotic language, Hadewijch describes Christ administering to her the Eucharistic sacrament. There is intimacy here between Hadewijch and Christ that surpasses simple embrace. This is evident in the final line where she indicates that her bodily embrace with Christ was felt in “full felicity” and “in accordance with the desire of my heart and my humanity.” It would seem that the desire of Hadewijch’s humanity is a carnal love, a rather sexual attraction between male (Christ) and female (Hadewijch).

While this first example does not contain reference to erotic suffering itself, it definitely gives insight into how Hadewijch perceived connection with the divine, namely through love and desire. Love was the “bridge between human and divine” as Amy Hollywood states. 109 And as Karma Lochrie notes in her essay “Mystical Acts, Queer Tendencies,” the “torment of desire” is a rather prominent theme in Hadewijch’s literature, caused not only by divine absence, but by

divine love itself.\textsuperscript{110} This sentiment is reflected in one of Hadewijch’s poems that Lochrie cites, where only “disgust and torture without pity” is acquired from this Love.\textsuperscript{111} The turbulent quality of desire, moving in and out of union with the divine, “founder[ing] unceasingly in heat and cold,”\textsuperscript{112} is a source of torment for Hadewijch which is greater than hell itself. However, this pain also serves to intensify the desire.

In the writings of Saint Teresa, erotic suffering perhaps takes on a different sense:

In his hands I saw a long golden spear and at the end of the iron tip I seemed to see a point of fire. With this he seemed to pierce my heart several times so that it penetrated to my entrails. When he drew it out, I thought he was drawing them out with it and he left me completely afire with a great love for God. The pain was so sharp that it made me utter several moans; and so excessive was the sweetness caused me by this intense pain that one can never wish to lose it, nor will one’s soul be content with anything less than God.\textsuperscript{113}

Many are familiar with Bernini’s famous “Ecstasy of Saint Teresa” sculpture representing this scene. Though it is often said that a picture is worth a thousand words, the brief excerpt here definitely conveys a greater sexual message than the sculpture itself. The spear imagery and the resulting joyous pain are suggestive of sexual intercourse. But the words explicitly convey a love for God that is intensifed through the pain Teresa feels, so much so that she does not want to be separated from the pain. As Glucklich’s model indicates, Teresa’s pain goes beyond analgesic and moves into a transcendent euphoria.


\textsuperscript{111} Hadewijch, \textit{Hadewijch: The Complete Works}, 356.

\textsuperscript{112} Ibid.

Religious Materiality, Medieval Images, and Shared Pain

Throughout the analysis thus far, the theme of “shared pain” has become increasingly prevalent. Through pain, the mystic shares in Christ’s own human suffering. Unlike the transcendent divine Christ, the suffering human Christ is undoubtedly far more accessible in the quest for spiritual enlightenment. This concept manifested itself quite frequently in the production of religious images during the medieval period.

Let us consider, for example, the pieta scene. The pieta is an image depicting the Virgin Mary holding the lifeless body of Jesus on her lap and in her arms. Because of the intense drama it conveys, it is an image that many artists have reproduced. When looking at one of these sculptures or paintings, “we see a mother looking solemnly at her son, who has suffered unfathomable pain and is now dead. He is draped across her lap in a way that shows lifelessness; his head is tilted back and he is often depicted with one arm dangling limp at his side.” The mother-and-son relationship is brought to the forefront, captured in Mary’s anguish. But while we are witnessing the body of a dead human being, he is simultaneously Christ, the divine son of God, who has taken on the wrath of God to atone for the sins of humanity. The juxtaposition of humanity and divinity is important to images of Christ and is captured quite powerfully in the pre-1350 A.D. Fritzlar Pietà (Appendix B). In this rendition, the artist adds several different tactile elements which are important to the viewer’s reaction to the piece. By relying on a multi-sensory mode of reception, the artist stresses the importance of the work’s material nature as well as its depiction of the human body and Christian theological elements.

In a culture as much visual as it was rooted in feeling, sight and cognition were undoubtedly critical to image reception. Michael Camille notes in his essay, “Before the Gaze,”

114 Brice Jenkins, The Medieval Sensory Experience, essay assignment for Prof. Jessica Boon, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1.
that medieval people conceived of sight in two different ways: extramission and intromission. Extramission was a theory more prevalent in the early Middle Ages and suggested that a “visual fire” came from the looker’s eyes to couple with a similar light or fire emanating from the object.\textsuperscript{115} Intromission became much more popular in the later Middle Ages, and undoubtedly had greater implications. Under this theory, vision originated from the object and was received by the viewer.\textsuperscript{116} And as reflected in the writings of Peter of Limoges, the eyes were understood to have direct access to the soul.\textsuperscript{117} Thomas Aquinas likens this reception to an impression on a wax tablet. In effect, the object becomes a seal imprinted on the brain.\textsuperscript{118} Having the image of the pieta stored in their memory, the medieval Christian would have a physical representation of the anguished Mother as well as the suffered Christ to contemplate, thus allowing them to share in Christ’s and Mary’s suffering. Looking closely at the sculpture itself, the most notable elements are the painted drops of blood from the numerous bodily wounds, as well as three-dimensional outpourings of blood coming out from the side and nail wounds. By witnessing all of these elements, the viewer is imprinted with all of Christ’s sufferings, rendered in meticulous detail on the sculpture. In effect, his wounds become their wounds.

But while internal sensory reception is important, the materiality of this sculpture is crucial to its effect as well. As with any sculptural image, a product of the imagination is being substantiated physically and materially. The profuse bleeding of the side and nail wounds was created through use of paper-mâché, creating blood that was different in composition from the


\textsuperscript{116} Ibid., 205-206.


sculpture itself (i.e. wood), thus reinforcing the reality that blood would pour out over the skin. On the statue, the blood emanates from large, open wounds, yet another element for the devotee to experience. The trim of Mary’s garment is actually leather, allowing the stiff wooden depiction of cloth to become more realized, both through sight and touch. The Fritzlar Pieta relies on a complex sensory experience, which speaks to the importance of materiality in religious culture of the Middle Ages. As David Morgan notes, religious material culture is important for most individuals because the majority of people do not identify as having direct encounters with the divine.\textsuperscript{119} The particular tactile details and elements like the leather on Mary’s garment and the raised wounds on the Fritzlar Pieta represent a form of “embodied epistemology.”\textsuperscript{120} As the world around us is experienced and validated by feel, so is the divine as well.

Caroline Walker Bynum notes how in images such as the “Charter of Human Redemption” (Appendix C), the material nature of the art itself can perhaps imply different theological applications. In this work, Christ is depicted with his torture tools, also known as the arma Christi (weapons of Christ). He is covered in bodily lesions, as well as major side and nail wounds. With the cross behind him, Christ opens his hands to the viewer over the text of a charter, his blood pouring over the parchment. The foot of the cross pierces the charter, and Christ’s side wound is depicted at the bottom, disconnected from his body above. As Bynum notes, the implications of this picture are astounding. Firstly, parchment itself was animal skin. Since the charter is depicted on parchment, and both it and Christ’s body appear to blend, Bynum


\textsuperscript{120} Ibid., 9.
suggests that the charter becomes part of Christ.\textsuperscript{121} This is affirmed by the externalized side wound showing the pierced and bleeding heart within the bounds of a gaping bodily incision. But in the placement of this side wound in the image, it effectively becomes the seal of the charter. This image uses its materiality to intensify and reinforce a theological effect for the viewer.

Shared suffering has a material nature, one rooted in Christ’s humanity but also in the materiality of the world. Using Durkheim’s model, it would seem that for these mystics, the human suffering of Christ is a totemic emblem of their religious experience since it is a representation and embodiment of their own physical suffering. And as Christ’s pain was a victory over sin, perhaps they saw victory in sharing that suffering as well.

I am not suggesting that these examples from Christian mysticism are representative of all religious traditions. However, they are indicative of religious experience driven by pain as a positive and productive agent. Glucklich’s models show that pain and suffering in this context can have diverse functions, especially in the way that destruction of the body translates to construction of the soul. Materiality becomes a source of spiritual truth. Emphasizing Christ’s humanity allowed mystics to see themselves in Christ through his suffering. For these Christian mystics, feeling pain brought them closer to the divine. Pain is not only the best conditioning agent, but the best disciplinarian, magical transformer, and medicine.

Pain, Religious Transcendence, and Sports

“The athletic realm involves the quest for being, realized through its fundamental mode of embodiment, the human body, and through the medium of human movement.” - William Morgan

There are undoubtedly some loose ends concerning the subjects of pain, sports, and religion that need to be tied together. First, I argued that sports can function religiously for an athlete by creating a sacred environment and order of existence. Second, I have shown that pain is an inevitable and necessary aspect of the sporting experience, proving to be a constructive source of growth and transformation, as well as fuel for the competitive spirit. And finally, I have explored how pain has functioned in different religious traditions as a vehicle for spiritual truth, discernment, and transcendent mystical experiences. With these thoughts in mind, I return to the original questions of this project: can pain be a vehicle for an experience that is comparatively “religious” in sports? And in this experience can an individual reach transcendence? To answer these questions, this section begins by comparing examples of pain in both realms in light of the models of pain considered so far. Next I will discuss various states of transcendence, both in sports and religion, and their biological similarities. This analysis will show that transcendent states in sports, induced by the biological response to movement and fatigue, are neurologically similar to that of religious trance states.

Comparing Pain in Sports and Religion

In both sports and religion, pain can be a meaningful experience. Whether viewed as good or bad, it can be directly attributable to a biological or divine cause. Athletes who are exerting themselves maximally know that increasing levels of physical and mental fatigue are the direct result of movement and power-output. In the same way, Henry Suso knows that physical pain will be brought about by sharp objects cutting into his skin. Julian of Norwich, who wished
for physical suffering from God, saw her intense sickness as a divine fulfillment of her desires. In all three examples, the individual who experiences pain can attribute it to a specific source.

But pain and suffering can also have a deeper meaning beyond their causes. For example, Dean Karnazes, when talking about running, said, “If it hurts, you’re doing it right.” Pain for an athlete can be a marker of effort, devotion to the task at hand, and maturity. In the same way, the presence of pain for the Christian mystic can serve as a marker of divine favor or a sign of devotion. Therefore pain can demonstrate one’s status, both physical and spiritual.

In sports and religion, the meaningfulness of pain is one reason it can be seen as constructive. If pain can adopt a positive meaning, human beings are able to identify pain as a beneficial agent. David Bakan discusses this idea in *Disease, Pain, and Sacrifice*, where he proposes that there are different locations in the body which are orientated towards a particular purpose, known as telic centers (from *telos* meaning “goal” or “end”). These teleological centers include the more somatic systems like the nervous system and immune system (which are responsible for running and maintaining the body), but also the ego and superego (that focus on reason and purpose). Bakan is drawing from Sigmund Freud’s theory on the tripartite division of human psyche and personality, which suggests that consciousness is divided into the unconscious *id* responsible for instinct and passions, the *ego* representing reason and common sense, and the *superego* responsible for self-judgment, a reflection of learned social norms. Bakan is suggesting that goals of the psyche hierarchically stand above those of the body in the

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122 Wristen, “For Karnazes.”


124 Ibid., 31-44.

system of telic centers. Thus as Ariel Glucklich suggests, an individual might identify with a higher goal of his ego or superego, while sacrificing that of a lower telic subsystem.\textsuperscript{126}

Bakan describes an agent like disease as telic-decentralizing, for it is destructive and counterproductive to the body’s goal of regeneration. Inversely, an agent can be telic-centralizing if it is constructive towards a goal. This model is particularly applicable to the subject at hand. As Glucklich states in \textit{Sacred Pain}, “if a pain can be transformed into a sacrifice, higher ends benefit at the expense of lower ends, and oddly, suffering is reduced.”\textsuperscript{127} By identifying with a telic-system for which physical pain is constructive, perhaps the super-ego or the spirit (in the religious realm), it is possible for the telic-decentralizing aspect of physical pain in the body to be overcome. Bakan’s theory allows us to understand how pain, while sometimes destructive, can become conceived as helpful. Glucklich’s models that we introduced in the prior section could be seen as ways in which pain has become telic-centralizing for the religious adherent, because spiritual goals are perceived as higher than physical goals.

This quality could be applied to sports as well, as an athlete might identify with their conceptions of victory and achievement, and thus sacrifice the body in the process. Turning back to Glucklich, how does pain in sports fit into his various models? The first rather obvious application would be that sports greatly reflect (and shape) the athletic model of pain. As I have noted several times in comparison to ascetic and mystical religious activity, the notion of mental, physical, and spiritual conditioning through intense and repeated exposure to bodily and psychological pain is critical to the training of an athlete to ensure optimum performance. Beyond this physical and mental transformation, however, there is a transformation of identity and even a transformation of form that would aptly fit into Glucklich’s magical model. As noted

\textsuperscript{126} Glucklich, \textit{Sacred Pain}, 61.

\textsuperscript{127} Ibid., 62.
before, the common locker room phrase, “No pain, no gain,” suggests that pain during and after a workout is the sign of physical transformation. By repeating this process over a period of time, an athlete’s body can transform into a form more suited to achieve success in their sport. The second idea above, transformation of identity, is particularly interesting as well. The example of Tiff Wood, the champion single sculler discussed above, is quite compelling, for the author states that his ability to reach past pain when no one else could made him a champion. Pain is almost purifying in this way, transforming competitors and creating them into winners. Arnold Schwarzenegger has stated, “The last three or four reps is what makes the muscle grow. This area of pain divides the champion from someone else who is not a champion. That's what most people lack, having the guts to go on and just say they'll go through the pain no matter what happens.”

The form and identity of a champion is achieved through the alchemical powers of pain.

The final models of pain I will consider in the context of sports are the psychotropic and ecstatic models, which I will discuss in detail in the next section concerning states of transcendence in sports. But it should be evident so far that pain has similar, if not the same, functions in sports as it does in religion. Thus far I have suggested that pain, by fostering improvement, brings an athlete closer to victory, which could be characterized as a supreme divine of sports. But if we were to identify a sports victory as a religious experience, then losing must also be religious as well. In the discussion on mystical religious love, I briefly examined how love became a source of agony for Hadewijch of Antwerp. Previous mystical encounters with God served to intensify her torment of desire whenever God felt absent, therefore becoming a part of her religious experience. In the same way, a sports defeat is a separation from victory, a spiritual dryness. If an athlete has ever achieved victory before, those brief touches with divinity

128 Coleman, “Arnold Schwarzenegger Quotes.”
serve to exacerbate the agony of defeat as well. The pain and anxiety associated with losing not only makes the competitive experience more exciting, but intensifies the desire for victory.

Not only does pain have the power to challenge and condition an athlete, but if we conceive of the competitive spirit as something deeper than the conscious mind, then the athlete is undergoing spiritual torment and conditioning as well. Pain has the power to transform individuals, lead them to different states of living, and thus produce an experience that is comparatively religious in sports.

*Transcendence in Sports*

I will now turn to a different kind of experience in sports where we find interesting parallels with religion: transcendence. There are many examples of athletes who undergo what could be categorized as “ecstatic” or “transcendent” experience. To explore this issue, let me return to the essay by Robert Araya discussed above. Araya stated that the activity of running functioned for him like religion, in that it allowed him to value life and bond with other individuals who viewed and experienced life in the same way. But what is even more striking is the new feeling he experienced while running a half marathon: the “runner’s high.” He says that the feeling was almost indescribable, and he quotes a description from Hal Higdon, a fellow long-distance runner: “[R]unners experience the so-called runner’s high, that sense of euphoria, the breaking free of the mind from the body which allows persons to reach a meditative state similar to that attained by Eastern mystics who place themselves into a trance.”\(^{129}\) Araya reports, “I felt the natural world embracing and pervading me completely.” He also describes the

\(^{129}\) Araya, “Running into a Revelation,” 1.
experience as an escape from reality into a “new, visceral world.” For him, the experience was special in its displacement.

In attempting to describe the experience further, Araya notes his heightened focus and awareness, and even the time-lengthening quality of the event. Ultimately he concludes that his “runner’s high” was indeed trance-like. For Araya, this experience helped shape his outlook on running, and life more generally. Comparing it to Roman Catholicism, Araya states, “Institutionalized religion, it seems, can have a tendency to plateau and cease to fully engage its adherents with anything as transformative and ethereal as that non-rational ‘wholly other’ I encountered this past October.” Araya experienced considerable insight in pushing the boundaries of his physical ability while running.

What is happening in the body when an individual feels this runner’s high? In a 2008 study at the University of Bonn, scientists performed brain-scans on ten athletes before and after a two hour endurance run. Results not only showed an increase in endorphin production in the brain, but the study showed opioid binding preference in the prefrontal and limbic/paralimbic brain structures. Since these areas of the brain are responsible for moods and “affective states,” the connection between running, endorphin production, and euphoria was demonstrated.

Raymond Prince compares the effect to the fight or flight hypothesis, where an animal that is subject to long, difficult, and painful motor exertion experiences the same endorphin-driven

130 Ibid.
131 Ibid., 2.
analgesic quality in order to bring about victory. Engaging in hyperactive activity can be painful and fatiguing, but it can also help to induce this euphoric biological reaction.

Therefore we have, through sports and athletic activity, pain acting as a vehicle for transcendence. Michael Murphy and Rhea A. White discuss another similar experience in In the Zone: Transcendent Experience in Sports. In this particular story, a man ran around the deck of a ship for five hours, going in and out of states of discomfort. Finally though, after about three hours the man reports,

I was beginning to lose touch with my body, floating away to distance places….There were thoughts of grandeur and supreme power; I could do anything. Then after a long time I began to encounter a new experience, a kind of vibrant numbness. A dull tingling throughout my whole body as if one of my limbs were coming awake after the circulation had been cut off. There was great pain but also ecstasy. I knew that I should stop but I couldn’t: I couldn’t let go of that power and joy.

This transcendent feeling is almost identical to Teresa of Avila’s account described above. Though Teresa was in pain, she felt supreme joy as well, feeling as if it were impossible to be rid of such divine pleasure. In the same way, the man above is having an ecstatic episode that he feels drawn to keep experiencing. It is important to recognize the quality of mental displacement taking place here. The experience, as much as it is rooted in the body, moves beyond the body as well. As we saw in the discussion of Christian mystics, the religious experience is itself rooted in materiality.

How are we to understand these athletic experiences when placed alongside similar religious experiences? Is the similarity enough to qualify the “runner’s high” as a religious experience? If we were to compare such events on the basis of neurology, they do not appear to be entirely different. As a relatively recent topic of study, Neurotheology is a science of

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religions, studying the correlations between brain activity and qualities of religious experience. Through countless studies, scientists have been able to attribute certain religious events (such as prayer, glossolalia, meditation, and scriptural reading) to different parts of the brain.\textsuperscript{135} This is an intriguing concept because, while it does not disqualify divine causes, it provides a comparable organic basis for studying sports and religion.

In his essay, “Shamanism as the Original Neurotheology,” Michael Winkelman notes how different rhythmic movements (such as dancing and clapping), extreme temperatures (such as cold or sweat lodges), and more ascetic practices (like food deprivation, flagellation, and self-wounding) can lead to the production of opioids in the brain, much like the runner’s high. “The release of natural opioids stimulates the immunological system and produces a sense of euphoria, certainty, and belongingness.”\textsuperscript{136} Winkelman also notes that community relationships can elicit this opioid production, where shamanic ceremonies are filled with emotion-eliciting cultural symbols. The social bonding that occurs in shamanic-healing therapies, for example, is an effect of opioid attachment mechanisms that work to psychobiologically synchronize groups of people.\textsuperscript{137} In this context it is interesting to compare the feeling of community Robert Araya experienced while running. In many ways, the opioid binding in the brain that occurs during his running activity, even beyond the euphoric and analgesic effects, is similar to Winkelman’s examples from shamanic activity. Perhaps this explains why athletes feel so connected to their other teammates when undergoing intense physical activity together.

\textsuperscript{135} Paul F. Cunningham, “Are Religious Experiences Really Localized Within the Brain? The Promise, Challenges, and Prospects of Neurotheology,” \textit{The Journal of Mind and Behavior} 32, no. 3 (Summer, 2011): 223-224.


\textsuperscript{137} Ibid., 208-209.
How different then are these experiences? If similar biological functions are occurring during sports and during religious events, it is difficult to elevate one above the other as “religious,” especially if an athlete feels that these experiences are uniquely transcendent, like Araya. We have already seen how pain can function similarly for the athlete as for the religious adherent, but this neurological comparison is definitely intriguing when considering how transcendent experiences play into the religious and athletic frameworks. It seems that through pain and fatigue in sports, we cannot only achieve an experience that is comparatively religious, but one that is deeply transcendent as well.\(^\text{138}\)

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\(^\text{138}\) This begs the question of whether or not pain caused by excessive practices in the sporting lifestyle (overtraining, starvation for weight-regulated sports like boxing or wrestling, etc.) should be seen as inducing a religious experience, or if the experiences that athletes undergoing these practices have should be considered religious. Such a topic definitely deserves a longer analysis and will not be concluded here; however, it would seem that overly excessive, self-destroying acts, even if in the pursuit of victory, can ultimately act against an athlete and be counterproductive to the human and religious experience.
Conclusion

There are many outlets for a human’s competitive spirit: business, academics, game shows. But there are no competitive pursuits as rooted in the act of movement and exertion as sports. As Sadhguru J. Vasudev, a contemporary mystic, stated, “Being a sport means you are willing to play. Willing to play means you are involved or alive to the situation in which you exist, and that is the essence of life. If there is anything that is truly close to a spiritual process, in the normal course of life, that is sports.” Vasudev also quotes Swami Vivekananda: “In kicking a ball or playing a game, you are much closer to the Divine than you will ever be in prayer.”139 If an individual conceives of sport as a spiritual endeavor, it is difficult to argue that its associated experiences are not religious.

On a social level, sports undoubtedly possess an element of the sacred. Sports involve objects and places that, by embodying the ideals of competition and human greatness, become the target of reverent affections. Though their sacredness might seem wholly external to the athlete, they are actually projections of the ideals of the individual and society, symbolic of victory and achievement. Sports become almost authoritative, forcing athletes into strict modes of living, conduct, and ritual practice in order to achieve as well as to embrace the divinity that is victory and excellence. Though this project does not claim that sport is religion, the underlying claim is that sports can serve religious functions. The convergence lies in comparing these two institutions on a social level. Sports and religion provide their adherents a way of conceptualizing space around them, a structure for living in such a world, and a mode of interacting with other individuals in that world. Within the microcosm that is sports and

athletics, there is a way of practice and behavior that, while separate from the “every-day” world, tends to pour over into and exercise authority over our profane lives.

The beauty of sports and religion is that both are rooted in outer and inner human experience, where the human body is directly involved. Whether this is the ritual movements of a Catholic priest administering the sacraments or the vigorous exertion during a one-hundred meter track sprint, the body is being used as purposeful means towards a sacred end. Thus the experience becomes all the more personal, especially with the presence of pain. Pain is an inevitable part of sports, for mental and physical fatigue are directly relatable to force output. But physical pain is common to religious practice as well, especially demonstrated in the experience of some Medieval Christian mystics who believed the suffering of the body was the best way to experience the divinity of Christ.

While pain is an ultimate marker of one’s humanity, it can serve as a valuable tool for achieving the divine. In both sports and religion, pain has the capacity to condition. By being subjected to physical and mental suffering over long periods of time, a human being has the ability to build endurance. Pain is also transformational. By undergoing the trials of suffering, an individual can emerge from the other side in a higher, more pure form. Finally, suffering can produce transcendence, the ability for the human to actually escape humanity, if at least for a brief moment, in order to embrace higher sacred elements.

This study diverges from the normal conception of sports and athletics as civil religions. Instead it focuses on the experience of athletes themselves rather than fans and other observers. The ultimate underlying question of this project is, “What counts as religious experience?” This question has been the subject of debate for ages, but through comparative studies, I believe we can find the answer to it in the social function of religion, namely the pursuit of the sacred.
While this might manifest itself in different beliefs, customs, and institutions, pursuing the sacred is a function which all religions share, regardless of belief in the external presence of divine powers. Sport, and the pain which is so foundational to it, has the ability to produce an experience that is comparatively religious and, in some cases, transcendent. Such a claim is important to the field of religious studies, for it opens the door to practices that, though previously were viewed as secular, might indeed fit into the context of religion. But this study is especially important for the world of sports and athletics, whose adherents are often identified with the “dumb jock” label. If we can view sports as an endeavor that is more religious, we might hope to explain the level of devotion certain athletes take in their craft.

The world of sports is also accessible. Movement and play are essential features of all human beings. Concerning the view of phenomenological philosophers, John Wall states, “They argue…that human being is ‘being-in-the-world’: the experience of interactively belonging to relations, societies, and cultures. In other words, human being can be described as an experience of play in the world.”¹⁴⁰ Thus, even outside the field of religious studies, exploring notions of human involvement in sports helps to uncover basic foundational notions of humanity and the concept of “being.”

But the crux of this project is pain, suffering, and their constructive nature. The ability for humans to use pain in the pursuit of play is a compelling example of human achievement, but it also further substantiates the religious quality of pain in sports. The notion that there is something beyond that can be achieved through sacrifice of the body is striking. As Leslie Anne Boldt summarizes concerning George Bataille’s view on human experience, “It is through a suppression of discursive activity and through a reintroduction of the sacred that we cease to

make an abuse of our existence. And it is through sacrifice that the sacred is reintroduced.\textsuperscript{141} In this fashion, pain is an important avenue for the sacred and religious experience in sports.

Appendix A: UNC Celebrates a Victory Over Duke

Photo Credits: This photo was taken on February 20, 2014 by Brice Jenkins; Location: Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Students are celebrating a basketball victory over Duke University immediately following the game by gathering on Franklin Street in Chapel Hill, NC.
Appendix B: Fritzlar Pieta

Painted wooden pieta, probably from before 1350, now in the Museum des Sankt-Petri-Domes, Fritzlar. The figure depicted is after restoration.


Appendix C: Charter of Human Redemption

“Charter of Human Redemption,” Folio 23r, Brit. Lib. Add. MS37049, a fifteenth-century Carthusian miscellany. Christ stands on Calvary, surround by the arma Christi and displaying a document. His blood-spotted body seems to become the charter below the side wound, illustration the popular devotional theme of Christ as charter of salvation and calling attention to document, page, and body as king. (Photo: © British Library Board.)

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