

Faith on the Field: A Cultural Analysis of Sports Ministry in America

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ABSTRACT

Annie Blakeney-Glazer, *Faith on the Field: A Cultural Analysis of Sports Ministry in America*
(Under the direction of Randall Styers)

Recognizing that sport carries a great deal of cultural significance in the United States and the world, evangelical Christians have been forming organizations that combine sport and Christianity for evangelism since the 1950s. At first, this movement focused primarily on men and on celebrity athletes. However, since the mid-1980s, women have surpassed men as the largest population involved in sports ministry, evidencing a significant shift in the movement to address athletes with limited celebrity potential. My dissertation treats sports ministry as more complicated than a simple tool for evangelism. Its growing presence in the United States cannot solely be explained by Americans' hero-worship of sports stars. More than just an evangelical platform, sports ministry organizations produce knowledge about what it means to be a Christian athlete, and this information is distributed to tens of thousands of athletes in the United States and the world over. Ultimately I argue that Christian athletes are able to use their embodied athletic experiences (like athletic pleasure and athletic pain) and the structures of sport (like gender distinctions, hierarchies of authority, explicit rules, and dualistic understandings) to affirm beliefs. As such, sports ministry's key function is not outreach to the non-believer, but affirmation of the saved through the production of embodied certainty of religious knowledge.

For My Parents

Thanks

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Praying, Playing, and Praising: Evangelical Sports Ministry in America

“Power is... standing at 6’3”, weighing nearly 300 pounds, able to benchpress more than 600 pounds... but none of those things even matter because this man has a love for Jesus in his heart. Please, welcome to the stage... The Bear!”¹

I rose to my feet with the rest of the audience to applaud the massively muscled man running down the aisle of New Hope Baptist Church to join his other Power Team members, and I felt overwhelmed by the spectacle before me. Over the previous days, I had spent a good many hours in the presence of the Power Team, mainly watching the strong men perform feats of strength in front of crowds of adolescents. The men would bend steel rods, tear phone books in half, and break stacks of bricks all the while praising Jesus and thanking him for the strength to perform these feats.

The Power Team is one of a handful of evangelical organizations that send groups of strong men (and a few women) to churches for multi-day “crusades” meant to bolster church membership and spread the gospel message.² The group performed nightly at

¹ Fieldnotes by author, 28 February through 4 March 2007, Raleigh, North Carolina. The following description of a Power Team worship service is a composite of several that I attended at New Hope Baptist Church over the course of the Power Team’s visit to Raleigh. Their performances followed a similar structure every evening, and I present this story as the final night of the Power Team “crusade” in order to capture significant reoccurring elements as well as unique elements of their closing night. Names of the performers have been changed to protect privacy.

² Other groups of this sort include the Next Generation Power Force and Team Impact.

New Hope Baptist Church and spent their days visiting area schools for motivational assemblies. (The team used a secular version of their performance for public schools and was openly religious at private schools.) Four members of the Power Team spent five days in Raleigh, North Carolina in March of 2007. While they were there, I attended the nightly services and school assemblies, talking with the performers, managers, and the huge number of New Hope Baptist Church volunteers responsible for ensuring that all events ran smoothly. I had just become interested in the combination of athletics and evangelism and an exploration of the Power Team spectacle seemed the perfect way to begin my research.

Armed with my theories of power, knowledge and authority, I traveled to New Hope Baptist Church fully expecting to dismiss the Power Team as an excessive spectacle of masculinity and conservatism. And while those elements were certainly present, what I didn't anticipate was the level of commitment from local church staff. While the Power Team was explicitly presented as an outreach initiative meant to draw outsiders to the church, the actual function of the team's visit seemed to be a solidification of the church's sense of community, affirming their understandings of both salvation and belonging. As I began to pay less attention to the spectacle on the stage and more attention to the people attending, supporting, and coordinating the Power Team's visit, I came across a far different story than I had envisioned. While I had first imagined sports ministry groups like the Power Team to be slick ploys at couching an evangelical agenda within a popular phenomenon, over the course of my research I came to see these groups as communities built on affirming believers' sense of Christian belonging. While this affirmation is not without effects, it made for a much more complicated picture that I

had initially anticipated. And, tonight, the last night of the Power Team crusade, I was just beginning to grasp the kinds of research questions that would guide my ensuing dissertation.

The Bear joined Josh, Chaz, and Big Ross on the stage to a flurry of high fives. Each member of the team then proceeded to smash a stack of bricks with either their fists or their forearms to the thunderous applause of the audience. New Hope Baptist Church's sanctuary holds about 1000 people, and while the crowd grew with each passing night, the sanctuary was never more than half full. In the sanctuary, the most imposing group was not the Power Team but the sea of blue-shirted volunteers seated in the first few rows. After the first round of brick smashing, the blue shirts swarmed over the stage clearing debris and setting up the next set of feats. With volunteers lugging bricks behind him, the Power Team leader, Josh, took the mic to introduce the next set of feats that the audience would see that night. "We've got a great show lined up for you. You are going to see the Bear explode eight cans of soda with his bare hands. You are going to see Chaz here blow up a hot water bottle and explode it with the power of his lungs. And I am going to attempt 'The Champion'—I will tear three license plates in half, three phonebooks, bend three 1" steel rods, break 24 baseball bats, and break out of a pair of handcuffs, all during the song, 'The Champion,' which is only two minutes and 37 seconds long." The crowd erupted with applause. Josh continued, "But, first the Bear is going to tell us a story."

This was Bear's cue to deliver his testimony. The Power Team were practiced storytellers and delivered tales of sorry lives before conversion and positive outcomes following conversion. Bear's is a solid example of this sort of story:

I was a messed up kid with a lot of anger. I can tell you something true: hurting people hurt people. I was hurting so I hurt others—I became a professional boxer. But I was also an alcoholic, and I lost everything. You know, my dream when I was a kid was to have an apartment and a car. Well, when I was a professional boxer, I became rich. I had a condo, an apartment, fancy cars, girls, parties, everything. But I lost it all. I moved back home to Minnesota and slept on my mom's couch.

One day, this pretty blonde woman asked me to go to church with her. Now, I didn't want to go to church, but she was so fine, I would have followed her anywhere. So, I went to church. I was walking up to the church and I felt something I had never felt before: fear. And I didn't like it. A man walked up to me and hugged me, saying, "I love you, brother." And I didn't like that. I was not used to men hugging me and certainly not saying I love you. That man couldn't have been more than 150 pounds, but he scared me by telling me that he loved me.

So I walked into church and I sat in the back row and didn't pay attention. I was still thinking about the blonde. After church, the pastor says to me, "Hey, why don't you try church for a month and if your life isn't different after that, then stop. Give it a month of Sundays." So, I came back the next week and the pastor is droning on and on and I'm looking around for that blonde, and I'm thinking, I'm gonna deck this guy if he wastes my time for a whole month. But I came back the next week and sat in the back row and I thought about what I was going to have for lunch, and then—there was like an arrow went straight into my heart, [sound effect on the mic—Phoom!], and another [Phoom!], and another [Phoom!], and the arrows just kept coming. [Phoom! Phoom! Phoom!] And that day, I gave my life to Jesus. And that blonde, I married her.

Everyone applauded, and the Power Team prepared to do another set of feats.

Bear's testimony followed a format that I was soon to become familiar with. For many evangelical Christians, the story of one's salvation is the most important story one can share. Over the course of my research, I heard nearly a hundred testimonies. They did not all involve the dramatic turns that Bear recounted, but they all followed one simple rule: life after conversion is fundamentally different than life before conversion.

For this group of Christians, conversion moments were of the utmost importance, and the Power Team was there to inspire conversions. Every Power Team performance culminated in an altar call, inviting those who wished to openly declare their commitment to Jesus Christ to come forward. Night after night, I watched crowds gather in response

to this call and couldn't help but think that these were casual and meaningless conversions. It seemed too simple to just walk to a stage and suddenly be saved. I learned later that there were very few first time commitments made and that the vast majority of those gathered at the stage had made a previous choice to convert and were confirming this decision. I came to understand altar calls, testimonies, and conversion moments not as melodramatic, overly elevated incidents but as a subtle set of practices that performed the important work of solidifying identity and community for believers.

The altar call on this last night was appropriately powerful. Following several more feats of strength, a monetary collection to help fund the Power Team mission, and testimony by another Power Team member, Josh took the mic again to deliver a gospel message and call for commitments to Jesus.

This has been God's plan since the beginning of time. We know from Genesis that God created the heavens and the earth, that God created man and woman. The devil was there in that garden and he tricked Adam and Eve into eating from the tree of knowledge. The Bible tells us that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. You might say, well, what is a sin, Josh? And I tell you, a sin is breaking God's laws. There is not one of us in this room that have not broken God's laws. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Then, 2000 years ago, God sent grace to redeem us. Crucifixion was part of God's plan, a plan to redeem mankind from that first curse.

Now, there are only two ways to live—on the narrow road or on the wide road. The narrow road is not easy—you have to strive to be like Christ. But if you do, you will find life. The wide road seems fun, but it only leads to destruction. It leads to a place called Hell. You might think that going to church and doing good works will get you into Heaven, but I am here to tell you that there is only one way to Heaven and that is through Jesus Christ.

God designed Heaven for people. God designed Heaven for people who accept Jesus Christ as their savior... Many of you are on that wide road, and it is my prayer tonight that you will get on that narrow road. Without Jesus, you will go to Hell. It's so simple. Why do people choose the devil and Hell? I don't know. Why would you want to spend eternity in a place called Hell? I want Jesus! [applause from the crowd] Going to church will not save you. You have to ask Jesus to be the Lord of your life or else you are heading for a place called Hell.

This gospel speech demonstrates some primary tenets of the evangelical belief structure, namely a very narrow definition of salvation. For evangelicals like Josh, salvation is a choice that one makes, a one-time commitment that is frequently reconfirmed, that changes the course of one's life and afterlife. Josh's speech also demonstrates a profound belief that God has a plan and that the devil is a real force for evil in the world. These themes—salvation as choice, God's plan, and the devil—were recurring throughout my two years of fieldwork with Christian athletes. Christian athletic organizations treat their primary mission as evangelism, outreach to non-believers through sharing the gospel. However, as I demonstrate in this dissertation, outreach is not the most evident function of these groups. The most evident function of sports ministry is affirmation of the saved through repeated emphasis on the defining characteristics of the evangelical community—a narrow definition of salvation, confidence in God's plan, and a dualistic worldview that positions both God and the devil as active forces in believers' lives.

Josh called for people to come forward, shouting, "Let the world know that you are proud of Jesus! You may be scared, but who cares what people think of you?" The room erupted with applause and Amens. "This is for God. Don't come up here unless you mean business." The crowd gathering at the foot of the stage was primarily children with a few adults interspersed. I saw a woman with tears streaming down her face. Many of the congregation were on their feet, openly enthusiastic. I also saw a number of families exiting out the back door, giving up on seeing the feats of strength finale in favor of escaping the altar call. And it did seem like the only way to avoid participating was to leave the room. Josh called out, "I am going to lead you in a prayer for salvation. And

everyone out there, I want you to pray along so that no one feels left out.” This call for everyone to pray effectively included the entire gathering. I continued writing in my notebook so that everyone would know that I was there for research, not salvation. But no one seemed to pay much attention to me. Josh concluded the prayer and the music began to swell. “Wait, hold the music,” Josh said. “This is our last night, and I feel called to do a second altar call. Tonight, you are all evangelists—turn to the person on your left and the person on your right and say, ‘Do you want to go up there?’ Then, grab their hand and take them down here with you.”

The crowd at Josh’s feet continued to grow and groups of twos and threes joined the throng. I continued to use my notebook as a way to avoid making eye contact with those on my right and left. But, no one turned to me or tried to grab my hand anyway. I felt very much like an outsider, and, as intended, I was extremely curious what it felt like to be in that crowd at the foot of the stage.

Throughout my fieldwork, I was present for a number of altar calls, though none were quite so intense as Josh’s. I never walked to the stage. As a non-believer and as a scholar wanting to respect the authenticity of my subjects’ actions, I never felt like I could walk down the aisle without declaring a commitment to Jesus. As such, I bought into the paradigm that the action of walking to the front of the crowd is intensely meaningful and carries important consequences. I also came to understand recommitment as just as important as one’s first time commitment. Recommitments were expected, if not required, by the communities I worked with.

As the crowd at the stage continued to grow, I could no longer tell who was actively committing and who was just standing up. I sat down. I could no longer see the

stage. I heard Josh saying, “God loves you. I’m proud of you. Let’s honor them,” and the whole church applauded. “You out there,” Josh addressed those who refrained from approaching the stage, “You can’t rejoice, you need to be here. If Jesus were here, would you still be sitting there or would you be jumping?” I continued to write all of this down. “It is no accident that you are here tonight. God planned for you to be here tonight. Satan wants to make us think this isn’t real. But we can rejoice, because it is real.” There was prolonged applause and I heard the Power Team manager on the microphone saying, “Let’s hear a big hand clap for the Lord! Don’t forget to visit our product table and pick up a t-shirt. We call it witness wear...” I ducked out of the church, heaving a sigh of relief.

In Susan Harding’s article, “Representing Fundamentalism: The Problem of the Repugnant Cultural Other,” she addressed her discomfort as a liberal scholar studying Jerry Falwell’s fundamentalist congregation. The questions that drew her to the repugnant fundamentalist other were the same questions that brought me to New Hope Baptist Church that night and to this dissertation project—how does a belief structure that appears utterly flawed from the outside hold so coherently from the inside? In exploring this question, Harding concluded, “Fundamentalists create themselves through their own cultural practices, but not exactly as they please. They are also constituted by modern discursive practices...”³ By this, she meant that the concept “fundamentalism” is defined relationally through media, common knowledge, and academic representations. “The explanations, the answers to ‘modern’ academic questions, invariably blot out

³ Susan Harding, “Representing Fundamentalism: The Problem of the Repugnant Cultural Other” *Social Research* 58 (Summer 1991), 373.

fundamentalist realities and turn all born-again believers into aberrant, usually backward or hoodwinked, versions of modern subjects, who are thereby established as the neutral norm of history.”⁴ I confess that I held many of these flawed presuppositions about conservative Christians when I walked through the door of New Hope Baptist Church that night. I turned to sports ministry to address questions of religious belief in contemporary America because I was drawn to spectacle and performance, thinking that these elements would highlight manipulation and celebrity power. I never expected that I would turn from an analyzer of spectacle to a sympathetic listener. But, as I worked with more and more Christian athletes, I became increasingly attuned to their struggle to unite sports and Christianity in a meaningful way. As I came to see this struggle as a site for articulating identity and maintaining community, I found it harder to dismiss sports ministry as simply a commercial gospel campaign.

The Power Team are an extreme example of athletic evangelism and over time I learned that the vast majority of sports ministry participants are not expert evangelists or explicit performers, but constitute a community of believers trying very hard to reconcile their desire to be athletes and their desire to be close to God. As I point out in chapter three, a number of authors have argued that the values of sport (competition, individualism, winning) seem to directly contradict the values of Christianity. Recognizing this tension, the driving questions for my dissertation were: how is a Christian athletic identity forged? How is it maintained? And to what effects? This dissertation tells the story of how sports ministry changed over time. It also tells the story of contemporary Christian athletes and their struggle to experience joy, Christ-

⁴ Ibid., 374.

likeness, and certainty of God's plan. Ultimately I argue that Christian athletes are able to use their embodied athletic experiences (like athletic pleasure and athletic pain) and the structures of sport (like gender distinctions, hierarchies of authority, explicit rules, and dualistic understandings) to affirm their identities as members of an evangelical Christian community.

Recognizing that sport carries a great deal of cultural significance in the United States and the world, evangelical Christians have been forming organizations that combine sport and Christianity for evangelism since the 1950s. At first, this movement focused primarily on men and on celebrity athletes. However, since the mid-1980s, women have surpassed men as the largest population involved in sports ministry, evidencing a significant shift in the movement to address athletes with limited celebrity potential. As such, sports ministry is more complicated than a simple tool for evangelism. Its growing presence in the United States cannot solely be explained by Americans' hero-worship of sports stars. Sports ministry organizations produce knowledge about what it means to be a Christian athlete, and this information is distributed to tens of thousands of athletes in the United States and the world over.

While the spectacle of the Power Team created heightened emotional intensity by interspersing violent destruction with narratives of God's power, the majority of sports ministry activities are far more banal and practical—addressing the everyday concerns of Christian athletes as they attempt to combine Christian and sporting identities. To more fully introduce this phenomenon, I will recount a brief history of the relationship between Christianity and sport in America, address the question of whether sport itself can be considered a religion, outline the theory and method I use in this dissertation and provide

a chapter synopsis. This introduction is meant to lay the groundwork for the historical and ethnographic chapters that follow. I hope to illustrate the importance of engaging sports ministry as a site of contemporary religious identity affirmation.

Sports Ministry Today and Yesterday

Sports ministry organizations identify themselves as non-denominational, para-church groups that use sports and sportspeople to evangelize. “Non-denominational” is slightly misleading since many sports ministry participants self-identify as members of evangelical Christian denominations like Baptist or Methodist. “Multi-denominational” would be a better term. The term “para-church” means that sports ministry organizations see themselves as working alongside traditional churches rather than as a replacement for church experience. Today, there are over 90 sports ministry organizations in the United States, involving tens of thousands of Americans. Sports ministry organizations exist for nearly every imaginable sport, from basketball and soccer to surfing and rodeo. In 2007, Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA), one of the oldest sports ministry organizations, reported that 42,000 athletes attended their summer camps.⁵ That same year, Athletes in Action (AIA), the sports ministry branch of Campus Crusade for Christ, hosted 33 national and international tours for athletic teams, involving nearly 800 athletes.⁶ The extent of these national organizations is striking, but these numbers fail to show the growth of sports ministry at a local level. As more and more athletes grow up affiliating

⁵ “2007 Annual Camp Report,” Fellowship of Christian Athletes. This number increased to over 46,000 in 2008. As an organization, FCA claim to have influenced almost 40,000 faith commitments in the 2007-2008 fiscal year. “FCA Ministry Impact Report,” Fellowship of Christian Athletes.

⁶ Interview by author, electronic mail, 29 August 2008.

their athletic and religious experiences, careers in sports ministry seem increasingly viable options. Athletes unable or unwilling to pursue careers as professional athletes may be able to coach or play for Christian teams at multiple levels—from youth club sports to semi-professional leagues. Additionally, several Christian colleges now offer degrees in sports ministry, putting sports ministry on more equal footing with traditional ministerial careers.⁷

It is clear that sports ministry has a large presence in America, but sports ministry was not the first instance of combining sport and Christianity. While I will dedicate much of chapter two to a historical exploration of the emergence of sports ministry, it may be helpful to briefly sketch the major precedent for this movement and contextualize sports ministry within American evangelicalism generally.

Sports ministry's major precedent was "muscular Christianity," a turn-of-the-century movement that emphasized strength and manliness as Christian obligations. Muscular Christianity emerged in Britain in the 1850s and quickly spread to America. Thomas Hughes's Tom Brown adventure stories were the most crucial literature in this movement. The most popular of the series, *Tom Brown's School Days*, was published in 1857 and chronicles the coming of age of young Tom Brown, a rugby player at a private boarding school.⁸ Through physical education, Brown developed a fighting spirit and a

⁷ According to The Association of Church Sports and Recreation Ministers (CSRM), there are currently 12 colleges offering degrees in sports ministry. CSRM – Colleges, <http://www.csrn.org/colleges.shtml> (accessed 20 October 2008). Many of these institutions began offering courses in sports ministry in the 1990s and instituted a major in the early 2000s. Colleges report varying numbers of participants; Belhaven College has 3-4 majors, whereas Mallone College has 25-30. Interviews by author, electronic mail, 19 October 2008.

⁸ Thomas Hughes, *Tom Brown's School Days* (Cambridge: Macmillan & Co., 1857).

moral sensibility that allowed him to defeat bullies and defend his friends. He was the fictional epitome of the muscular Christian ethos—the idea that boys turn into men through regimented discipline and obedience and that Christian moral character is related to athletic training.

The elevation of Tom Brown as a moral model supported a collusion of athletic endeavors and religious devotion. According to historian Axel Bundgaard, “Hughes fashioned Tom Brown as a model for all public school lads, that is, a young man with physical vigor, courage, and strength.”⁹ By 1860, the notion that sturdiness of body demonstrated strength of character was widely held.¹⁰

While Tom Brown gained popularity in England, the US also developed a muscular Christian ethos. Historian William Baker writes:

Americans borrowed from England merely the term, not the movement, of muscular Christianity. The movement itself originated simultaneously in Great Britain and the United States, largely because moral leaders in both countries responded similarly to similar urban problems of physical congestion, poor health, and changing attitudes toward religion, work, and play.¹¹

According to Clifford Putney, muscular Christianity in the United States was a response to anxieties regarding industrialization, urbanization, and the perceived feminization of the church. Muscular Christianity promoted a religious manliness that relied on improving the body as well as the soul. This constituted a dramatic shift from the Puritan perception of sports as ungodly leisure, and, as Putney points out, the understanding that

⁹ Axel Bundgaard, *Muscle and Manliness: The Rise of Sport in American Boarding Schools* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2005), 25.

¹⁰ Ibid., 27.

¹¹ William J. Baker, *Playing with God: Religion and Modern Sport* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), 35.

sport builds Christian character developed over time.¹² As industry replaced agricultural labor as the defining force in men's lives, "another kind of male dominance, athletic prowess, became a central feature in the definition of manliness."¹³ As muscular Christianity took hold in America, it became commonplace to describe health and vigor as key manly virtues. One Methodist minister summed up the ideology, noting that it was as much man's moral duty "to have a good digestion, and sweet breath, and strong arms, and stalwart legs, and an erect bearing as it is to read his Bible, or say his prayers, or love his neighbor as himself."¹⁴

Axel Bundgaard's study of sports in American boys' boarding schools argues that when athletics were implemented, it was understood that the goal was character development, firmly linking athletic and moral training. Civil War veterans hoped that "young men could learn the hard lessons of war and develop tough moral character through battle on the playing field without the actual bloodshed and death of armed conflict."¹⁵ As a generation of boys grew up without military opportunities to prove their bravery, sports became a central component of character demonstration. Over the following century, sport as a character-building enterprise was naturalized, and with the passage of Title IX in 1972, it was largely agreed that women should have equal access to the benefits of physical education and sport.

¹² Clifford Putney, *Muscular Christianity: Manhood and Sports in Protestant America, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001), 20.

¹³ William J. Baker, "Introduction" in *Basketball: Its Origin and Development*. James Naismith (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), xii.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, xi.

¹⁵ Bundgaard, *Muscle and Manliness*, 171.

Muscular Christianity predated sports ministry by over 50 years, but the links formed between religion and sport at that time still inform sports ministry practices. Sports ministry emerged in the 1950s and 1960s, just after a general re-emergence of evangelical Christianity in the United States following a generation of isolationist strategies by conservative Christians.¹⁶ After the 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor, the nation rejected isolationism in favor of global political and economic involvement. For conservative Christians as well, isolationism became difficult to justify.¹⁷ In 1942, a

¹⁶ According to Donald Dayton and Robert Johnston, there are three distinct periods in Protestant history when the term “evangelical” was employed. The first was during the Reformation, the second during the Great Awakenings, and the third during the fundamentalist/modernist debates of the 1920s. Robert Johnston, “American Evangelicalism: An Extended Family” in *The Variety of American Evangelicalism*, ed. Donald Dayton and Robert Johnston (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991), 252-272. Other scholars posit that the evangelicalism of the 1940s and 1950s was distinct from the fundamentalism of the 1920s. George M. Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 1991). For texts addressing evangelicalism’s history, see Amanda Porterfield, *Healing in the History of Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Mark A. Noll, *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1997); and Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp, Leigh Eric Schmidt, and Mark R. Valeri, *Practicing Protestants: Histories of Christian Life in America, 1630-1965* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006). Many treat the 1925 Scopes Monkey trial as a turning point in the history of conservative Christianity in the United States. See, in particular, Susan Friend Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 61-82. Harding’s chapter on the Scopes Trial is an illuminating account of how the American press presented the trial and also how contemporary fundamentalists understand the event. Harding notes that both the modernist press and contemporary fundamentalists posit that the Scopes Trial was a turning point for American fundamentalists. However, as Harding points out, the presentation of a fundamentalist retreat was largely an illusion propagated by modernists, who imagined fundamentalism as a slowly dying holdout of conservatism. Contrary to this presentation, Harding notes that, from the 1930s to the 1980s, independent fundamental Baptists grew to be one of the largest and longstanding religious networks in America.

¹⁷ Sally K. Gallagher, *Evangelical Identity and Gendered Family Life* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 7.

group of conservative Christian leaders gathered in St. Louis and formed the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) based on a doctrine called “engaged orthodoxy.” Engaged orthodoxy called on evangelicals to interact with non-Christians politically and culturally, a definitive shift from fundamentalist isolationist strategies.¹⁸

National evangelical organizations formed, including Billy Graham’s Youth For Christ in 1944 and Bill Bright’s Campus Crusade for Christ in 1951. The Fuller Theological Seminary, founded in 1947, was the first of many explicitly evangelical institutions of higher learning, contributing to a growing population of educated middle-class conservative Christians. The periodical *Christianity Today*, first published in 1956, served to clearly identify a target population of evangelical Christians. The success of these organizations evidenced a growing number of Americans who engaged in conservative Christianity and American culture simultaneously.

Don McClanen, the founder of Fellowship of Christian athletes, was influenced by the success of evangelical Christian organizations and also by the growing attention to athletic celebrities in the US. Like muscular Christian institutions, FCA sought to promote manliness and strength as Christian obligations. McClanen told his constituents, “My idea is to form an organization that would project you as Christian men before the youth and athletes of this nation.”¹⁹ Conflating manliness, morality, and athletics was central to sports ministry’s beginnings.

¹⁸ These events are highlighted in Christian Smith’s work on American evangelicals. Smith, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

¹⁹ Wayne Atcheson, *Impact for Christ: How FCA Has Influenced the Sports World* (Grand Island, Nebr.: Cross Training Publishing, 1994), 158.

In the 1970s American evangelicals received increased national attention. Robert Wuthnow noted that evangelical political presence dramatically increased in the late 1970s.²⁰ He argued that political events at the time led to a blurring of public and private morality. According to Wuthnow, morality prior to the 1970s was understood as a private choice that should not be dictated by the government. However, key political developments served to blur this distinction. The Watergate scandal of 1972 demonstrated that private morality could have significant public effects. A year later, the *Roe v. Wade* decision protected a woman's right to an abortion through ensuring privacy rights. This landmark case in American judicial history was one of the first national interventions in determining the definition of human life. Additionally, reactions to the Vietnam War were construed as moral positions, with supporting or protesting understood as moral obligations. Wuthnow theorizes that these events led to greater evangelical political engagement by making morality a politically debatable and legally enforceable subject.

The study of American evangelicals has become increasingly nuanced and complex over the past two decades. Perhaps this is because the increased political presence of evangelicals in the late 1970s and 1980s motivated scholars to thoroughly investigate the movement. The word "evangelical" comes from the Greek word for "gospel" or "good news" and refers specifically to the central component of evangelical theology: Jesus' death and resurrection. As evidenced by the Power Team's altar call, Jesus' resurrection is meant to convey God's love for humanity and demonstrate that

²⁰ Robert Wuthnow, "The Political Rebirth of American Evangelicals" in *The New Christian Right*, eds. Robert C. Liebman, Robert Wuthnow, and James L. Guth (Hawthorne, NY: Aldine Pub. Co., 1983), 167-185.

Jesus is the only avenue for human salvation. According to Christian Smith, evangelical Christians see themselves as *in* but not *of* the world.²¹ This means that they understand the world as temporary and corrupted, and therefore take it as their mission to reach as many people as possible with the message of salvation through Jesus Christ. Investigations of evangelicalism have generally focused on how adherents are not as homogenous and univocal as their political spokespeople may lead one to believe.²²

Within religious studies, there is an ongoing debate over how to define “evangelicalism.” Scholars recognize that this term is not self-evident or simple, but in fact envelops a great variety of people and institutions. Donald Dayton goes so far as to suggest that the term is dismissive and leads scholars to ignore theological and cultural creativity occurring in and between groups lumped under this label.²³ For the purposes of my dissertation, however, the category “evangelical” is useful. Since sports ministry organizations consider themselves non-denominational, para-church organizations and think of their work as benefiting churches in general and Christianity as a whole, the vagueness and breadth of the term “evangelical” is applicable and perhaps even beneficial. Sports ministry, like “evangelicalism,” is a far-reaching and multiply-defined

²¹ Smith, *American Evangelicalism*, particularly chapter 4.

²² Religious studies scholars tend to cluster and delineate evangelicals in America either through self-identification and measurable behavior or through historical identification of institutions. On self-identification and measurable behavior, see Christian Smith “Appendix B: On Religious Identities” in *American Evangelicalism*, 233-247; and Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith Since World War II* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988). On historical and institutional identification, see Mark A. Noll, *American Evangelical Christianity: An Introduction* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 2001); and George M. Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 1991).

²³ Donald Dayton, “Some Doubts about the Usefulness of the Category ‘Evangelical’” in *The Variety of American Evangelicalism*, 245-251.

phenomenon. Despite the theological complexity that Dayton highlights, sports ministry participants tend to assume an ideological unity through core religious beliefs. In the simplest possible terms, these beliefs include: the inherent sinfulness of humanity, the power of God to intercede in human affairs, salvation through Jesus Christ, and the urgent obligation to share this information with others. The Bible is understood to be the infallible word of God that can exercise power over people's hearts and minds. My use of the term "evangelical" refers to these core beliefs as well as the political history of Christian institutions that prioritize gospel outreach. As such, I see evangelicalism as an ideology and as a cultural relationship. Sports ministry is predicated on evangelical theology and is primarily aligned with conservative politics.

Through actively combining sports and Christianity, sports ministry provides a counter example to the argument that sport itself can constitute a religion. In the following section, I turn to scholarship that presents sport as religion and explain why this presentation of sport is not helpful for my project.

Is Sport a Religion?

Recent scholarship in religious studies has begun to address sport as an important category of human experience, and several scholars have raised the question: is sport a religion? I find this question problematic. In attempting to equate sport and religion, scholars often rely on narrow definitions of each, eclipsing the many ways that athletes, coaches, and fans may understand athletics as *religious*, but not as *a religion*. In tracing the definitions employed in this scholarship, I hope to demonstrate the limitations of this

approach and clarify how my own work is a departure from the claim that sport is a religion.²⁴

Clearly, the strength of claiming that sport is a religion depends on the definition of religion that one uses. In general, there are three types of definitions of religion: definitions based on form, definitions based on function, and definitions based on content. Formal definitions describe the format or elements that compose religion. For example, in Catherine Albanese's introductory religious studies textbook, she employs a formal approach to religion, stating, "it may be more fruitful to think not of defining religion but, instead, of trying to describe it."²⁵ Her resulting description points to four formal features of a religious system: creed ("explanations about the meaning of human life"), code ("rules that govern everyday behavior"), cultuses ("rituals to act out the insights and understandings that are expressed in creeds and codes"), and communities ("groups of people either formally or informally bound together by the creed, code, and

²⁴ Other scholars have investigated the lived experiences of religious athletes. See, for example, Julie Byrne's work on Catholic female basketball players and Joseph Alter's work on wrestling as a religious practice in India. Julie Byrne, *O God of Players: The Story of the Immaculata Mighty Macs* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003); Joseph S. Alter, *The Wrestler's Body: Identity and Ideology in North India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992). Additionally, there is a growing body of scholarship that focuses on how athletes combine sport and spirituality. The Center for the Study of Sport and Spirituality at York St. John University in England formed in 2007 and has begun publishing a quarterly journal on the subject, addressing this combination in multiple faiths and countries. For examples of these sorts of studies, see Jim Parry, Simon Robinson, Nick J. Watson and Mark Nesti, eds. *Sport and Spirituality: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2007) and Tara Magdalinski and Timothy John Lindsay Chandler, eds. *With God on Their Side: Sport in the Service of Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

²⁵ Catherine L. Albanese, *America: Religions and Religion* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1992), 2.

cultus they share”).²⁶ This formal explanation of religion can be used to argue that sporting communities are religious communities. Michael Novak makes this argument in his work, writing, “Sports flow outward into action from a deep natural impulse that is radically religious: an impulse of freedom, respect for ritual limits, a zest for symbolic meaning, and a longing for perfection... Sports are religious in the sense that they are organized institutions, disciplines, and liturgies; and also in the sense that they teach religious qualities of heart and soul.”²⁷ Novak’s claim that sport is a religion relies on understanding religion as an organized community bound together by rules, rituals, and a shared understanding of human perfection. This claim is only successful if religion is defined by its form.

Formal definitions of religion are not the only definitions that lend themselves to comparison with sport. Functional definitions of religion explore what religion accomplishes in the lives of its adherents. Emile Durkheim argued that religions function to orient persons in sacred time and sacred space. He wrote, “The division of the world into two domains, one containing all that is sacred and the other all that is profane—such is the distinctive trait of religious thought.”²⁸ According to Durkheim, this separation of the sacred and the profane allows people to experience “effervescence,” an exciting sensation of power only accessible through the sacred. “In one world [the religious person] languidly carries on his daily life; the other is one that he cannot enter without

²⁶ Ibid., 9-10.

²⁷ Michael Novak, “The Natural Religion” in *Sport and Religion*, ed. Shirl Hoffman (Champaign Ill.: Human Kinetics Books), 36.

²⁸ Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen E. Fields (New York: The Free Press, 1995), 34.

abruptly entering into relations with extraordinary powers that excite him to the point of frenzy. The first is the profane world and the second, the world of sacred things.”²⁹

Mircea Eliade also developed a functional definition of religion based on the sacred and the profane. He argued, “For religious man, space is not homogenous; he experiences interruptions, breaks in it; some parts of space are qualitatively different from others.”³⁰

Likewise, Eliade posited that time is experienced differently for religious persons with certain periods of time elevated and esteemed for their sacred nature. This functional definition of religion is easily applied to sports. For example, David Chidester argued that, “[Baseball] is a religious institution that maintains the continuity, uniformity, sacred time, and sacred space of American life.”³¹ Chidester described baseball in religious terms strikingly similar to Durkheim and Eliade, emphasizing the function of baseball in the lives of baseball fans: the season serves to create sacred times and sacred spaces. In a similar argument, Joseph Price maintains that big-time sports in America form a sacred calendar with football, basketball, and baseball elevating and distinguishing sacred times and spaces.³² Price goes so far as to argue that the Super Bowl “functions as a major religious festival for American culture” by invoking myths of American origin and

²⁹ Ibid., 220.

³⁰ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. William R. Trask (San Diego: Harcourt, 1959), 20.

³¹ David Chidester, “The Church of Baseball, the Fetish of Coca-Cola, and the Potlatch of Rock 'N' Roll” in *Religion and Popular Culture in America*, eds. Bruce David Forbes and Jeffrey H. Mahan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 221.

³² Joseph L. Price, ed. *From Season to Season: Sports as American Religion* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 2001).

dominance.³³ If the function of religion is to delineate special times and places and to produce ecstatic communal feelings, then sport (especially big-time, spectator sport) can be described as a religion.

However, definitions of religion based on content are less likely to resonate with sport. Content-based definitions are theological and involve claims about the existence of the supernatural or essential aspects of religious experience. For example, Rudolph Otto argued that the concept of “the holy” contains an “overplus of meaning,” which he named “the numinous.” According to Otto, the numinous quality of religion has the power to stir in people a feeling of absolute powerlessness and holy dread in the face of absolute power.³⁴ While some argue that sport can have this quality, it is through definitions of content that scholars are able to challenge understandings of sport as a religion. For example, Joan Chandler’s article, “Sport is Not a Religion,” argues that religion raises questions of ultimate meaning and provide followers with answers based on the supernatural. She writes, “While sport may provide us with examples of belief, ritual, sacrifice, and transcendence, all of them take place in a context designed wittingly and specifically by human beings, for the delight of human beings.”³⁵ For Chandler, sport is explicitly void of supernatural content and hence cannot be considered a religion. While I agree that sport in itself is unlikely to provide access to the supernatural, I am willing to recognize that many athletes see sport as spiritually rewarding and religiously

³³ Joseph L. Price, “The Super Bowl as Religious Festival” in *Sport and Religion*, 13-15.

³⁴ Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981).

³⁵ Joan M. Chandler, “Sport is Not a Religion” in *Religion and Sport*, 59.

significant. In sports ministry, this is not because sport is a religion but because sport can be a religious practice.

The debate between scholars as to whether sport can be called a religion is at its core a debate over definitions of religion. A major limitation of this debate that that scholars fail to investigate a definition of sport, relying on cultural assumptions that sport means big-time events and celebrity spectacles that affect large numbers of people through the use of media. However, as sport sociologists have pointed out, “sport” is a more varied category than big-time media events. As scholar of sporting culture David Andrews put it, “there is no guaranteed or essential manifestation, experience or, indeed definition of sport... Sport should instead be understood as a necessarily malleable collective noun suggesting the diversity and complexity of what are temporally and spatially contingent expressions of physical culture.”³⁶ This dissertation explores sporting experiences that are not big-time celebrity media events, but instead form a community of religious athletes that conflate sport and religion, not based on form or function, but based on content. The athletes in this dissertation understand their athletic activity as a religious obligation and that understanding meshes religion and sport in a different way than analyses of the Super Bowl as a form of American mythmaking.

In investigating this particular combination of religion and sport, I follow David Andrews’ model. He argues that our scholarly obligation is “to locate particular sport forms and experiences in the socio-historical context within which they come to exist and

³⁶ David Andrews, *Sport-Commerce-Culture: Essays on Sport in Late Capitalist America* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006), 1.

operate.”³⁷ Andrews continues, “Sport is at the same time constitutive of the boundaries framing social experience, and a forum for the manufacturing of individual lives.”³⁸ One could easily replace “sport” with “religion” in this quotation. However, as Thomas Tweed has pointed out, “To say that religions are individual as well as collective does not go far enough, since that formulation does not highlight the ways that those individual processes are biological as well as cultural.”³⁹ Certainly the collusion of sport and religion in sports ministry is one place to investigate the biological, embodied dimensions of religious experience. Religion and sport are both spheres of human development that form boundaries of social experience, contribute to individual development, and rely on embodied sensation.

In this dissertation, I address the origin, spread, and individual practices of sports ministry, and devote much attention to context. According to Karl Marx, human behavior and consciousness are informed by material reality. Marx famously wrote in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, “[Humans] make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past.”⁴⁰ Taking this seriously means investigating what parts of social, material, and

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Andrews, *Sport-Commerce-Culture*, 3.

³⁹ Thomas Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006), 64.

⁴⁰ Karl Marx, “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1978), 595. Clearly this insight has informed Harding’s work on fundamentalism as she uses these words to describe her subjects.

historical reality inform and construct human interaction. Marx saw labor as a key force in human identity, and Andrews uses this insight to connect sport to politics, economics, and society. Religion, as a social institution, is also informed and constructed through material reality. Therefore, I treat sports ministry as a cultural practice affected by material and historical forces.

Theory and Method

In order to investigate the social interaction and material reality of sports ministry, I employ a cultural studies approach. As a field, the central object of cultural studies is the relations between practice and discourse with particular attention to forms of knowledge and structures of power.⁴¹ This means that cultural studies looks at what people do and what people say to investigate what relationships and what knowledge motivates these actions and words.

Michel Foucault is a central voice in the field of cultural studies, and I have found his work on governmentality instrumental in forming my investigative questions for this dissertation. Governmentality is the relationship between technologies of power and technologies of the self. Technologies of power are imposed disciplinary forces, and

⁴¹ “In cultural studies traditions, then, culture is understood *both* as a way of life—encompassing ideas, attitudes, languages, practices, institutions, and structures of power—and a whole range of cultural practices: artistic forms, texts, canons, architecture, mass-produced commodities and so forth.” Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula A. Treichler, “Cultural Studies: An Introduction” in *Cultural Studies*, eds. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula A. Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1992), 5. For further work on the definition of cultural studies, see Lawrence Grossberg, *Bringing It All Back Home: Essays on Cultural Studies* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997); John Hartley, *A Short History of Cultural Studies* (London: Sage, 2003); and John Storey, *What Is Cultural Studies?: A Reader* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996).

these are always connected to technologies of the self, which are the ways that humans actively produce self-knowledge.⁴² In this dissertation, I ask how Christian athletes produce knowledge about themselves and how they are able to use the disciplinary forces of Christianity and the structures of sport to create a sustainable Christian athletic identity. Like all social institutions, sports ministry can be understood as a nexus of technologies of power and technologies of the self. Persons involved in sports ministry are subject to technologies of power through participation in athletic organizational systems at the high school, college, and professional level. They are also subjected to religious technologies of power stemming from evangelical understandings of what it means to be a Christian. These systems are dominating, constraining forces that direct behaviors and thoughts.

However, if we recognize that technologies of power are always connected to technologies of the self, we can then recognize that people use technologies of power to create self-knowledge in different and often innovative ways. According to Foucault, “Everybody both acts and thinks. The way people act or react is linked to a way of thinking, and of course thinking is related to tradition. ... To the same situation, people react in very different ways.”⁴³ Though thinking is constrained by tradition, people

⁴² For Foucault’s work on Christianity as a form of self-knowledge see, L.H. Martin, et al., *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault* (London: Tavistock, 1988); Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: The Use of Pleasure* (New York: Vintage, 1990); and Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: The Care of the Self* (New York: Vintage, 1990). A good example of Foucault’s take on governmentality is *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège De France, 1974-1975* (New York: Picador, 2003), wherein Foucault investigates how knowledge of what is sexually deviant is produced through medical and juridical authorities.

⁴³ Rux Martin, “Truth, Power, Self: An Interview with Michel Foucault, October 25, 1982” in *Technologies of the Self*, 14.

develop different ways of knowing themselves and understanding their roles in society. In sports ministry, for example, athletes develop different responses to the directive to use their athleticism to evangelize. They might see this as an exhortation to preach or to behave in a sportsmanlike manner or to actively demonstrate their Christian affiliation by having Christian symbols on their uniforms. I address this multiplicity of responses in chapter six in my investigation of the many understandings of Christ-likeness in sports ministry environments.

My thinking on the relationship between technologies of power and technologies of the self is also informed by the works of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari.⁴⁴ From Deleuze and Guattari, I have learned to see the field of human interaction as a shifting terrain that is constantly erasing and recreating itself. This means that forms of knowledge and systems of power rarely hold perfectly and constantly form and reform. Sport and religion constitute two forms of knowledge maintained by systems of power. Recognizing that these systems do not hold perfectly means acknowledging moments of rupture and breakdown and paying close attention to how these moments are treated and integrated. Therefore, studying sports ministry from a Deleuzian perspective means attuning to innovation and control, recognizing that overarching and constraining mechanisms form a symbiotic relationship with human creativity.

Because I am interested in the effects of sports ministry at both the social and individual scale, I employ both historical and anthropological methods in my dissertation. I conducted archival research at the headquarters of both FCA and AIA and practiced

⁴⁴ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (London: Athlone Press, 1988).

participant-observation with Christian athletic groups at multiple fieldsites. In the archive and in the field, I focused on the forms of knowledge and systems of power that allowed and directed the formation and trajectory of sports ministry in the United States. Sports ministry, as noted, is international in scope, present at every level of the sport hierarchy, and has changed over time. As such, multi-sited ethnography has been an important tool for engaging the complexity and variety within this cultural group. To practice multi-sited ethnography means to engage multiple sites within a group—institutions, publications, celebrations, tragedies, and everyday practices.⁴⁵ Multi-sited investigations call for following connections, associations, and relationships.⁴⁶ I employed this model in my dissertation research in order to focus on complexity and change within sports ministry, visiting multiple sites and paying attention to the many practices and relationships that form sports ministry's growing network.

Chapter Outline

This dissertation proceeds in two parts. I include three chapters addressing the history of sports ministry in the United States and three chapters on specific fieldsites.

⁴⁵ For two methodological sources on multi-sited ethnography, see George E. Marcus, *Ethnography through Thick and Thin* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998) and Emily Martin, "Anthropology and the Cultural Study of Science: From Citadels to String Figures" in *Anthropological Locations: Boundaries and Grounds of a Field Science*, Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, eds. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 131-146.

⁴⁶ A good example of this is Bruno Latour, *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers through Society* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987). Instead of an ethnography of one particular lab (a fieldsite), Latour engages a range of scientific practices and connections, ultimately depicting a complicated network of actors (people, institutions, money, and technologies). For other anthropological investigations along these lines see Jonathan Xavier Inda, ed. *Anthropologies of Modernity: Foucault, Governmentality, and Life Politics* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2005).

The following chapter includes an historical overview of the relationship between sports and Christianity in America. I contextualize the rise of sports ministry in the 1950s and 1960s through an investigation of the precedents set by muscular Christianity in the late nineteenth century, paying particular attention to understandings of manliness and evangelism that continue to underpin sports ministry. I also examine economic practices in the US that affected sports ministry, arguing that the economic logic of mass production and standardization contributed to a homogenization of Christian athletic narratives and limited Christian athletic spokespeople to celebrity athletes, a population that was primarily male.

The third chapter, “The Making of an Athlete of God,” turns to changes in sports ministry in the 1970s, noting that evangelical uses of sport shifted away from celebrity evangelism and toward individual religious experience. I focus on the work of Wes Neal, an Athletes in Action competitive weightlifter and a major force in turning sports ministry’s attention to individual religious experiences. I argue that Neal’s theological understandings of sports ministry were informed by his interaction with the larger bodybuilding community of Southern California, particularly by prevalent understandings of the mental dimension of sport. His work coincided with the growth of sporting opportunities for women and these factors contributed to the large number of women now involved in sports ministry. Chapter four, “Sports Ministry and Female Athletes,” raises questions about the effects of sports ministry membership for women, noting that involvement in conservative Christian communities is an effective way to offset perceptions of female athletes as mannish or sexually deviant.

Following these historical chapters, I provide an ethnographic exploration of sports ministry at three sites: FCA summer camp for high school athletes, AIA's traveling women's basketball team, and the competitive season of a women's semi-professional Christian soccer team. The fifth chapter, "Game Ready: Spiritual Warfare and the FCA Camp Experience," explores resonant structures between sports ministry and the war on terror. The high school athletes at FCA camp were taught that their sporting experiences should be understood as a battle between God and Satan in their minds and through their bodies. This emphasis on an unseen and determined enemy was an important point of resonance between evangelical ideas on spiritual warfare and modern political rhetoric on states of emergency.

Chapter six, "Becoming Christ-like: Playing to Win *is* Playing for God," is the story of AIA's traveling women's basketball team. In this chapter, I investigate the struggle to integrate Christian and athletic practices. I argue that "Christ-likeness" functions as an unattainable goal within the Christian athletic community, positioning believers on an unending trajectory of attempting to become what they cannot be. This self-understanding elevates a particular form of desire as a key element of Christian athletics. I use differences between player experiences to argue that becoming Christ-like is not deterministic, but holds different effects for different players.

The final ethnographic chapter, "Interlocking Logics: The Parallel Practices of Evangelicalism and Sport," investigates the production of knowledge on a Christian soccer team. Using my fieldwork with the Charlotte Lady Eagles, I note the similarity in pedagogical strategies between athletic practice and evangelical training. I argue that

evangelicalism and sports form reinforcing systems of knowledge by using parallel authority structures, communication techniques, and group distinction practices.

In the conclusion, I use my fieldwork and historical research to argue that sport can function to affirm evangelical beliefs. Christian athletes develop an intimate knowledge of God's power and pleasure through embodied experiences. Sports ministry's focus on individual religious experience, use of the discourses of spiritual warfare and Christ-likeness, and the epistemological resonances between sport and evangelicalism serve to affirm the religious knowledge of the Christian athletic community. As such, I argue that sports ministry is not so much a tool for evangelistic outreach as it is a tool for confirming existing religious beliefs.

CHAPTER 2

Sports Ministry is Born (Again)

In 1954, Don McClanen wrote letters to a number of athletic celebrities that he knew to be Christian. He told them, “If athletes can endorse shaving cream, razor blades, and cigarettes, surely they can endorse the Lord, too. So my idea is to form an organization that would project you as Christian men before the youth and athletes of this nation.”⁴⁷ McClanen’s letter writing campaign resulted in the formation of Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA), America’s first sports ministry organization. Sports ministry, the practice of using athletes and coaches as Christian witnesses, was framed largely in terms of economics and masculinity during its first decades. By the mid-twentieth century, athletes had become premiere product endorsers and were promoted as icons of masculinity. Early sports ministers like McClanen saw these athletes as masculine celebrities with the power to spread the gospel.

During the first decades of sports ministry in the United States, a growing fitness craze centered the popular imagination on sports and exercise on a greater scale than ever before, creating a growing athletic fan base. Athletes increased in celebrity power as more and more Americans bought televisions, watched sports, and joined gyms. Additionally, the rise of television as an advertising and entertainment medium added a

⁴⁷ Wayne Atcheson, *Impact for Christ: How FCA Has Influenced the Sports World* (Grand Island, Nebr.: Cross Training Publishing, 1994), 158.

new dimension to the way evangelicals approached witnessing. As athletic celebrities received elevated cultural attention, evangelicals began to recruit and train Christian athletes to be public proponents of Christianity, constituting the initial incarnation of sports ministry.

This chapter addresses the emergence of sports ministry in America. As noted in the previous chapter, muscular Christianity provided a major precedent for the combination of sport and Christianity. I return this historical precedent to show how evangelical understandings of masculinity connected to sport. I then look at the decades when sports ministry emerged, the 1950s and 1960s, noting the widespread influence of celebrity culture, the fitness industry, and evangelical witnessing. Muscular Christianity, the rise of sporting culture in the mid-twentieth century, and evangelical innovations of the 1940s were key factors in the formation of sports ministry. I note that evangelical innovations shared a common feature with the growing sporting industry; both were influenced by economic trends of mass-production and standardization. Through reliance on muscular Christian understandings of manliness, recognition of athletic celebrity power, and use of production strategies of the day, sports ministry quickly established itself as a far-reaching and effective evangelistic tool. In this chapter, I explore these three convergent trends in order to contextualize the emergence of sports ministry. Ultimately, I argue that sports ministry was in line in with the economic logic of the time; it prioritized the mass production of standardized narratives. These formative factors allowed sports ministry to emerge but also constrained the movement. Evangelical sporting narratives appeared as homogenous and sports ministry participation was limited to a population with access to celebrity power—elite male athletes in mainstream sports.

Muscular Christianity was a primarily Protestant phenomenon that emphasized strength of character, manliness, and Christian morality. The movement can be traced to Britain in the 1840s and 1850s, and it gained acceptance in the United States following the American Civil War. According to historian Clifford Putney, muscular Christianity was a response to industrialization, urbanization, and the perceived feminization of the church.⁴⁸ Putney and others have cited these changes as the basis for a nineteenth-century crisis of masculinity. As roles for men and women shifted, religious organizations in particular became concerned with what it meant to “be a man.” Although women had long been the majority of church goers, historian Ann Douglas argued that the late nineteenth century constituted a special relationship between male clergy and female laity, granting women increased influence in the church and at home.⁴⁹ She points to a fear that effeminate clergy would either create a decline in manliness or dissuade manly men from churchgoing. In response to this perceived decline, muscular

⁴⁸ Clifford Putney, *Muscular Christianity: Manhood and Sports in Protestant America, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001).

⁴⁹ See Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Noonday Press/Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998). As Ann Braude points out, feminization is a long-standing myth in the narrative of U.S. religious history. The traditional narrative follows the decline of church power in the Colonial period with disestablishment, the feminization of the church through a majority female membership and sentimental clergy in the Victorian period, and secularization in the twentieth century. In response to claims of feminization, Braude points out that women were the majority of churchgoers during all three of these periods. Construing the Victorian period as one of feminization reflects the fears and attitudes of male spokespeople, not the ratios of church attendants. Ann Braude, “Women’s Religious History IS American Religious History” in *Retelling U.S. Religious History*, eds. Thomas A. Tweed and Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1997), 87-107. Braude’s work is part of a growing body of scholarship challenging the traditional narrative of U.S. religious history. See also Jeffrey K. Hadden and Anson D. Shupe, eds. *Secularization and Fundamentalism Reconsidered* (New York: Paragon House, 1989).

Christianity promoted a specific ideal of manliness, connecting physical prowess, moral virtue, and Christian beliefs. The Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), one of the first muscular Christian institutions, reflected these values as the institution began promoting physical education as a Christian obligation.⁵⁰

In the 1880s and 1890s, as industry replaced agricultural labor as the defining force in men's lives, "another kind of male dominance, athletic prowess, became a central feature in the definition of manliness."⁵¹ Physical exertion became a choice form of leisure, rather than a labor requirement. This stands in stark contrast to earlier Puritan arguments that framed athletics as ungodly. Sports had previously been decried as a distraction from Godly behavior and competitions were outlawed on Sundays as late as the 1910s.⁵² In the late nineteenth century, men primarily engaged in baseball and football. The National Baseball Association formed in 1858, and by the late 1860s, corporations had their own baseball teams. Football emerged as a modified form of rugby in the 1880s and became a popular competitive sport for elite colleges with a growing spectator base over the turn of the century. The growing popularity of these

⁵⁰ Many excellent scholarly works exist on the YMCA. In particular, the following address the cultural context and effects of the Y's emphasis on physical education. John Donald Gustav-Wrathall, *Take the Young Stranger by the Hand: Same-Sex Relations and the YMCA* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Nina Mjagkij and Margaret Spratt, *Men and Women Adrift: The YMCA and the YWCA in the City* (New York: New York University Press, 1997); and Thomas Winter, *Making Men, Making Class: The YMCA and Workingmen, 1877-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

⁵¹ William J. Baker, "Introduction" in *Basketball: Its Origin and Development*. James Naismith (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), xii.

⁵² William Baker, *Playing With God: Religion and Modern Sport* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), 104.

sports evidenced a growing urban population of men who saw sport as an important component of their lives.

Football in particular was considered a martial endeavor—the violence and danger of the sport connected it to war and its American origin made it a source of patriotism. Michael Oriard argued that football demonstrated the cultural values of the late nineteenth century. He highlights two narratives consistently invoked in press coverage of the sport—the narrative of individual genius in the character of the All-American and the narrative of competing corporations in descriptions of coaching strategies. According to Oriard, the All-American served to solidify the myth of individual success through hard work and determination. Additionally, the coach emerged as a key figure, often described in terms of a corporate leader organizing an efficient workforce. Turning to the father of American football, Walter Camp, Oriard writes, “Camp...envisioned American football as purposeful work. That is, the model of ‘perfection’ for Camp in late nineteenth-century America was the rationalized, bureaucratic, specialized corporate workforce.”⁵³ Coaching strategies mirrored management strategies in division of labor and implementation of hierarchy. This points to the emerging definition of manliness as a combination of business savvy and athletic prowess. Muscular Christian institutions adopted this definition, adding Christian morality as an important masculine trait.

As football and baseball grew in popularity and as sporting manliness was increasingly connected to Christianity through muscular Christian institutions, the

⁵³ Michael Oriard, *Reading Football: How the Popular Press Created an American Spectacle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 41.

YMCA saw a need to develop a competitive game that could be played indoors during the winter months. Between football and baseball seasons, there was a glaring lack of competitive sport for physical education. At the YMCA training facility in Springfield, Massachusetts, director of physical education Luther Gulick assigned the task of creating an indoor winter sport to James Naismith. Basketball was the result. After experimenting with versions of indoor rugby and football, often resulting in injury, goals were elevated to discourage rough physical contact. The initial rules allowed the ball to move up and down the court only by passing, emphasizing teamwork and cooperation.⁵⁴ Due to its development within a muscular Christian institution, basketball is arguably the best reflection of muscular Christian ideals. Therefore, examining the game of basketball in depth can reveal the ways that cultural and economic knowledge informed muscular Christianity, and through extension, this examination can reveal how cultural and economic knowledge impacted sports ministry.

Basketball was created to emphasize teamwork over individuality and accuracy over brute strength. Naismith saw that newly urbanized businessmen (the targets of YMCA programming) enjoyed competitive sports. According to Naismith, by the 1890s,

[Football, baseball, and track] had been firmly established, and many of the more active students took part in them. When the men engaged in these sports went to the city to enter business and found that they had leisure time, it was only natural that they should look for some kind of athletic diversion.⁵⁵

These men were “frankly discontented” with winter gymnastics in comparison to the thrilling action of football. “What this new generation wanted was pleasure and thrill

⁵⁴ Naismith, *Basketball*, 53-55.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.

rather than physical benefits.”⁵⁶ And so basketball, in its early form, was meant to reflect the social desire for thrilling competition as well as the values of teamwork and fair play.

Naismith consciously constructed a game that would demonstrate the values of muscular Christianity. He believed that simply playing the game could serve as moral education. His vision and enthusiasm influenced YMCA practices—missionaries sent to foreign countries would often be sent abroad with a Bible and Naismith’s list of the ten rules of basketball. There were several unforeseen consequences of Naismith’s invention. Because the game discouraged rough physical contact, it was seen as an appropriate sport for women and women began playing the game a year after its invention. Women’s rules were developed to decrease the strenuousness of the game, and Naismith heartily applauded the extension of the game to both genders: “[B]asketball was enthusiastically received by the girls. It was really the first chance that they had to participate in an active sport.”⁵⁷ Another unintended consequence resulted from the fact that basketball was very inexpensive to implement. As opposed to baseball and football that required special fields and equipment, basketball could be played in any gymnasium with relatively little equipment. This economic factor helped basketball spread quickly throughout American school systems. High schools implemented the sport relatively soon after its invention, and by 1905 it was recognized as an official winter sport by colleges.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 168.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 120.

The game that Naismith invented went through many permutations over the next half-century. Naismith himself voiced concerns over rule changes that seemed to undermine his original goals. For example, in the early 1930s, teams began to employ a strategy of defensive stalling—refusing to go after the ball, sometimes stalling for as long as nineteen minutes. Naismith writes, “Under these conditions, the people were forced to sit in their seats and watch ten men on the floor doing nothing. A great many people did not care to pay to see two teams at opposite ends of the floor looking at each other.”⁵⁹ Coaches agreed that stalling was a hazard to the popularity of the game and convened to discuss rule changes that would prevent this defensive strategy. Naismith recommended a number of possible rule additions that would put the burden of stalling on the defensive team.⁶⁰ However, the eventual ten-second rule (a player cannot hold the ball for more than ten seconds) put the burden on the offensive team. Naismith opposed this rule for three reasons. First, it would not prevent stalling. (Hence the implementation of the shot-clock in 1954.) Second, it crowded all the players on one side of the court. “This crowding could not help but make for roughness, and an increase in the number of fouls was inevitable.”⁶¹ Third, he worried that this new rule elevated coaches above players. “When an offensive team slowly went down the floor toward a set defense, there was

⁵⁹ Ibid., 81.

⁶⁰ In particular, Naismith recommended the following: “1. Any team that retreated under the basket and refused to make an attempt to get the ball for thirty seconds would be penalized by giving the other side a free throw... 2. Any basket that was shot from outside of the defensive players should count four points. 3. That not more than three defensive players be allowed on the defensive half of the court while the ball was on the other half.” Ibid., 82.

⁶¹ Ibid., 83.

little chance but that those players would try to execute some play in which they had been thoroughly drilled. These players were not allowed to think for themselves, but were supposed to do one certain thing.”⁶² Naismith’s original sporting narrative of cooperative teamwork shifted to reflect a cultural value of aggressive action and hierarchical supervision.

Changes in the game of basketball coincided with a larger cultural decline in overt muscular Christianity at the turn of the century. During this time, Theodore Roosevelt promoted the muscular Christian values of manliness and physical strength as patriotic rather than religious obligations. Roosevelt popularized the term “strenuous life,” promoting a series of experiences that challenged young men through competitive sports and encounters with nature. Americans had accepted the muscular Christian premise that strong character could be achieved through physical education and mastery of the natural world. Roosevelt expressed this ethos when he wrote in 1897, “We don’t want to see the virtuous young man always have shoulders that slope like those of a champagne bottle, while the young man who is not virtuous is allowed to monopolize the burly strength which must be possessed by every great and masterful nation.”⁶³

Following the example of the YMCA, boys’ schools at the turn of the century embraced athletics as character building practices. In 1900 Roosevelt praised school sports as a method of developing the manly traits he thought vital to America’s male youth. He wrote:

⁶² Ibid., 84.

⁶³ Quoted in Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, 11.

Nowadays, whatever other faults the son of rich parents may tend to develop, he is at least forced by the opinion of all his associates of his own age to bear himself well in manly exercises and to develop his body—and therefore, to a certain extent, his character—in the rough sports which call for pluck, endurance, and physical address.⁶⁴

As the 20th century progressed, Americans fought in two world wars, reinvoking an equation of masculinity and militarism. Roosevelt was a major influence on militaristic manliness. According to Putney:

For Roosevelt the most exalted justification of war was neither geopolitical nor missionary. Instead, it involved war's ennobling effects on the human frame—its imposition of discipline and its forging of courage and mettle.... Overestimating Roosevelt's appeal—warlike and otherwise—to Protestant America would be hard to do.⁶⁵

Roosevelt was key for the acceptance, promotion, and secularization of the muscular Christian ideal. As World War II ended, muscular Christian values were firmly embedded in the American psyche, contributing to the rise of the modern fitness movement. Muscular Christianity and Roosevelt's "strenuous life" established a strong connection between physical education, morality, and manliness. The modern fitness movement emerged from this value set and, as such, provided the basis for the emergence of sports ministry.

The modern fitness movement began in the early twentieth century as more and more people became convinced that "it was both possible and desirable to positively affect one's health and reshape one's body through exercise."⁶⁶ The American military

⁶⁴ Ibid., 106.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 35.

⁶⁶ Marla Matzer Rose, *Muscle Beach* (New York: St. Martin's 2001), 4. Rose's book chronicles the rise and fall of the original Muscle Beach in Santa Monica, California. Muscle Beach has since officially relocated to Venice Beach, California, center of the

began implementing a fitness regime in 1914. And, according to military historian Wanda Ellen Wakefield, this collusion of sports and war did much to overcome the nineteenth century crisis of masculinity:

[A]s a style of masculinity emphasizing aggressiveness and physicality was reclaimed, and as the idea that a young man's character could only be fully developed through athletic contact with other men was embraced, the search for a place where men could act out their physical aggressions was intensified. ... And as they grew stronger by playing sports, or learned how to honor that strength in others, many American men in particular concluded that their masculinity could also be saved by leading their country into the modern imperial world.⁶⁷

Wakefield notes that the military establishment promoted athletic training as crucial for military success. Language of sports and militarism were mixed as games were described in terms of war and military missions were described as team endeavors. War, as a masculine domain, became highly affiliated with sports, a parallel masculine domain. While women both served in the military and participated in sports, their athletic training was framed as a way to increase their sexual desirability, rather than demonstrate independent strength.⁶⁸

bodybuilding world during its golden years, 1965-1971. See Dick Tyler, *West Coast Bodybuilding Scene: The Golden Era* (Santa Cruz, Calif.: On Target Publications, 2004).

⁶⁷ Wanda Ellen Wakefield, *Playing to Win: Sports and the American Military, 1898-1945* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of the New York Press, 1997), 8-9.

⁶⁸ Wakefield notes that athletic women (especially lesbians) and non-athletic men posed a threat to the athletic-masculine hierarchy that was an integral part of military training. "Accordingly, lesbian women within the armed services were placed in an extremely awkward situation. If they played sports to the best of their abilities, they would be fitting cultural assumptions about the mannishness of lesbian women. This was the opposite of the dilemma faced by those men in the service whose interest in sports was less than keen or who gravitated to sports that were assumed to be best suited to the 'sissy.' By rejecting sports altogether or by choosing to participate in sports that did not seem to be sufficiently aggressive and dangerous, these men seemed to be rejecting their masculinity." Wakefield, *Playing to Win*, 137.

On the domestic front, California became a nexus of fitness activity as gymnasts and strong-men from around the world began congregating in Santa Monica on a strip of sand that would become known as “Muscle Beach.” Muscle Beach grew in popularity in the early 1930s, perhaps due to the popularization of gymnastics in the 1932 Olympic Games in Los Angeles. Despite the name, throughout the 1930s, there was an emphasis on gymnastic ability at Muscle Beach, not muscular bulk. Feats of strength were important, but also flexibility and agility. However, bodybuilding and weightlifting began to take hold in the late 1930s, and by the end of World War II physical strength became the number one spectacle on the beach. According to historian Marla Matzer Rose,

Television and World War II were the best things that ever happened to the fitness movement in America. Both brought people together, in a sense, and exposed them to ideas and other people they never otherwise would have encountered. One of these ideas, which had been percolating for some time now, was strength training.⁶⁹

Men who knew about weightlifting brought their weights to war with them and taught weight training skills to other soldiers. After the war, a number of influential trainers began established television shows and opened gym franchises across the country. “Team sports as recreation and character-building activities had long been popular for

Additionally, the YWCA was increasingly threatened throughout the 1920s by the YMCA’s offer of programming for women, girls, and mixed-gender groups. As Jodi Vandenberg-Daves chronicles, the rise of gender-integrated programming undermined the Victorian doctrine of separate spheres in favor of establishing “companionate” relationships where women were often positioned as subservient to men. Jodi Vandenberg-Davies, “The Manly Pursuit of a Partnership between the Sexes: The Debate over YMCA Programs for Women and Girls, 1914-1933,” *The Journal of American History* 78.4 (1992): 1324-46.

⁶⁹ Rose, *Muscle Beach*, 111.

young men in the United States. What was different now was an emphasis on fitness for its own sake, practiced individually and thought of as a lifelong goal.”⁷⁰

Following the second World War, the sporting industry meshed with Fordism as a system of production. Fordism, named after the father of standardized production strategies Henry Ford, is a system of mass production. Control is centralized, labor is primarily manual, and products are standardized for mass consumption. According to cultural scholar David Harvey, “Postwar Fordism has to be seen... less as a mere system of mass production and more as a total way of life. Mass production meant standardization of product as well as mass consumption; and that meant a whole new aesthetic and a commodification of culture....”⁷¹ This new aesthetic and commodification manifested in the fitness industry with the mass production of athletic equipment, training materials, and nationwide chains of gyms. Additionally, this coincided with a change in media technologies. Television proved integral to the rise of personal fitness as in-home workout programming gained popularity and sports spectatorship increased on a grand scale. In the United States in 1947, there were around 14,000 television sets; in 1948, 172,000; and by 1950, 4 million. By 1954, there were 32 million sets and before the end of the decade 90 percent of American homes had a television.⁷²

⁷⁰ Ibid., 113.

⁷¹ David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1990), 135.

⁷² Joshua Gamson, “The Assembly Line of Greatness: Celebrity in Twentieth-Century America,” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 9.1 (1992): 20n8.

Jack Lalanne, a fitness entrepreneur in the 1950s, is a prime example of the rise of fitness television under Fordism. “The Jack Lalanne Show” first appeared in 1951 on San Francisco networks and was America’s first in-home aerobic television program. By 1959, Lalanne’s show was broadcast on more than 200 stations across the nation, and Lalanne soon became a celebrity motivational speaker with his own line of fitness products.⁷³ His show was mass-produced for a wide consumer market and demonstrates the Fordist tendency to standardize products.

As more and more Americans became interested in physical fitness, television coverage of sports changed. Roone Arledge, an employee of ABC, revolutionized televised sports in the 1960s through targeting the “casual viewer.” Arledge’s plan to increase ABC’s viewership involved editing sports to the average person’s attention span, rather than relying on a die-hard group of spectators. His sports coverage employed multiple cameras, microphones, commentators, and the newly invented slow motion instant replay. The result was a change in spectatorship; Arledge’s innovations made sports programming accessible to a wider audience and increased the national attention given to athletics.⁷⁴ Changes in fitness consumption and sport spectatorship through television were a major factor in the elevation of sporting celebrity. Sports ministry

⁷³ Rose, *Muscle Beach*, 111-120.

⁷⁴ Arledge began *The Wide World of Sports* in 1961, a show that highlighted alternative and extreme sports from around the world. By this time, sports programming had become an integral part of television and other networks were forced to promote sports coverage to compete with ABC. See, Randy Roberts and James Olson, “The Impact of Roone Arledge on Televised Sports” in *Major Problems in American Sport History: Documents and Essays*, ed. Steven A. Riess (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), 417-425.

would not make sense if Americans were unable to recognize or did not admire athletic celebrities.

California was the heart of the fitness movement, but it was also home to one of the largest and most influential evangelical networks—Campus Crusade for Christ. On the campus of UCLA, Bill Bright, inspired by Billy Graham’s Youth For Christ, began Campus Crusade for Christ in 1951. Bright’s ministry defined itself through “aggressive evangelism.” This was different than “friendly evangelism,” a tool used by other evangelistic groups to gain the trust and respect of a colleague before sharing the gospel. Aggressive evangelism prioritized proclamation of belief and testimony as the first piece of information Christians should share about themselves. In order to assist Crusade members in this task, Bright developed a twenty-minute presentation for staff to memorize called “God’s Plan for Your Life.” According to ministry scholar, Richard Quebedeaux, “As far as Bill was concerned, this how-to-do-it approach worked, and it became the model for almost all subsequent evangelistic and training materials published by the movement. It was pragmatic.”⁷⁵

It was also Fordist. Bright created a mass-producible and mass-consumable version of the gospel, first in the form of a memorized verbal speech, and later in print materials. He developed a condensed version of “God’s Plan for Your Life” in 1965 called *The Four Spiritual Laws*, and, according to Crusade’s website, this is the most widely distributed religious booklet in history with 2.5 billion printed to date.⁷⁶ The four

⁷⁵ Richard Quebedeaux, *I Found It!: The Story of Bill Bright and Campus Crusade* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), 93.

⁷⁶ “About Us,” Campus Crusade For Christ, <http://www.campuscrusadeforchrist.com/aboutus/history.htm> (accessed 12 July 2008).

spiritual laws are used by a variety of evangelical organizations today, and are often referred to as a simple gospel message.⁷⁷ Bright boiled down salvation through Jesus Christ to four concise statements, followed by a short example prayer that the reader could use to start their personal relationship with Christ.⁷⁸ *The Four Spiritual Laws* booklet serves as a prime example of standardization and mass production; the genius of the booklet was its high degree of portability and simplicity. The gospel is treated as a step-by-step process that can and should be the same for everyone. According to religious studies scholar David Harrington Watt, the booklet “reveals popular evangelicalism’s close ties to the advertising ethos of American commercial culture and its emphasis on the this-worldly rewards of Christianity.”⁷⁹ *The Four Spiritual Laws* demonstrates the ability of Christian organizations to successfully implement economic production strategies.

Following the success of *The Four Spiritual Laws*, Bright developed several theological training products, including a series on “transferable concepts.” According to Bright, transferable concepts were teachings that could be communicated from one

⁷⁷ Quebedeaux, *I Found It!*, 97.

⁷⁸ The four spiritual laws are: 1) God loves you as has a wonderful plan for your life, 2) Humans are sinful and separated from God, 3) Jesus Christ provides the only avenue for humans to have meaningful access to God, and 4) Humans must individually pray to receive Jesus in order to access God and salvation. The four spiritual laws are used around the world to communicate this message. For an exploration on how this is a departure from a traditional gospel message, see David Harrington Watt, *A Transforming Faith: Explorations of Twentieth-Century American Evangelicalism* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1991), 22.

⁷⁹ Watt, *A Transforming Faith*, 18.

person to another without distorting or affecting the content.⁸⁰ In the early 1970s, transferable concepts appeared in a series of booklets written by Bright on such ideas as how to be sure you are Christian, how to love by faith, and how to introduce others to Christ. In the same way that aerobic fitness was standardized through television programming, evangelistic messages were boiled down, mass produced, and mass distributed in the era of Fordism.

Bright was certainly not the only Christian to integrate business savvy with evangelism; he was part of a large network of evangelical institutions that sought to retell the gospel in terms accessible to a wide number of people. According to Watt,

What made Bright's message particularly troubling to such writers [conservative evangelicals] was its typicality: such apparent offers of cheap grace abounded in postwar American evangelism... evangelicalism's remarkable statistical strength was, according to some of its critics, the result of its failure to preach a challenging message. As they saw it, it was a simple matter of cheap, easy grace selling better than costly discipleship.⁸¹

Positioning Bright as in the business of selling grace connects evangelicalism to commercial strategies and reminds us that religion and religious practices occur in economic and cultural contexts.

Early sports ministry, as a combination of athletic and evangelistic enterprises, reflects the economic logic of Fordism. Evangelism is a practice centered on conversion, on making a decision to become a Christian. Language of decision-making brought together conversion and consumption, making Christianity easily presented as a consumer product. Don McClanen's idea for Fellowship of Christian Athletes in 1954

⁸⁰ Quebedeaux, *I Found It!*, 103.

⁸¹ Watt, *A Transforming Faith*, 27, 28.

was born of celebrity sales power and the standardization of the gospel message. To revisit McClanen's letter that opened this chapter, he wrote:

If athletes can endorse shaving cream, razor blades, and cigarettes, surely they can endorse the Lord, too. So my idea is to form an organization that would project you [athletes] as Christian men before the youth and athletes of this nation.⁸²

Two things are evident from this statement. First, McClanen imagined the gospel as a product to be consumed by the public. And second, McClanen saw a need to present Christianity as masculine by relying on male athletic spokespeople. As in muscular Christianity, men were the targets and spokespeople of early sports ministry with the explicit goal of presenting a masculine side to religious devotion.

While combining athletics and masculinity was not new, what was new was the conflation of religious outreach and salesmanship. The 1950s post-war boom, combined with the advertising power of television, foregrounded buying and selling. This allowed McClanen to envision Christianity as a product on the market that could be endorsed by celebrities. Advertising theorist Pamela Odih writes, "The Fordist separation of economy and culture invited consumers to constitute their identities through the purchase of products whose stories and images echo historically specific grand narratives."⁸³ The use of sporting celebrity to sell products gestured to the grand narratives of capitalism, including "competition, achievement, efficiency, technology, and meritocracy."⁸⁴ As

⁸² Atcheson, *Impact for Christ*, 158.

⁸³ Pamela Odih, *Advertising in Modern and Postmodern Times* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2007), 5.

⁸⁴ Steven J. Jackson, David L. Andrews, and Jay Sherer, "Introduction" in *Sport, Culture and Advertising: Identities, Commodities and the Politics of Representation*, ed. Steven J. Jackson and David L. Andrews (New York: Routledge, 2005), 10.

sport and culture theorists continually point out, sport constitutes a cultural nexus that reflects economic values of production and consumption while, at the same time, emphasizing individual achievement and physical excellence. “A culture of individualism places emphasis on personal effort, achievement, toughness, and strength... The institution of modern sport is a culturally significant repository for these values, an institutional setting in which such values are continually reaffirmed and accorded popular acclaim.”⁸⁵ Evangelicals following the second World War sought to emphasize manliness and Christian virtue, therefore sports seemed a clear venue for evangelical action.

In the mid-1960s, Dave Hannah, founder of Campus Crusade’s sports ministry branch Athletes in Action, employed advertising and celebrity endorsement language in describing his vision of an athletic ministry:

The idea for the project came to Hannah one day as he watched a Campus Crusade music group share an evangelistic message through its performance. Hannah thought out loud, “Why couldn’t an athletic team be used in the same way? ... Athletes are used to sell everything from candy bars to cars. Why not have them tell about something far greater—the message of Jesus Christ?”⁸⁶

Sports ministry founders Hannah and McClanen noticed the rise of athletic endorsements in the television industry and envisioned using America’s hero-worship of athletes to further an evangelical agenda. William Baker has criticized sports ministry’s language of salesmanship, noting that, “Unfortunately, this approach frequently comes across as a mere sales pitch... For all their focus on the athletic arena, evangelicals have

⁸⁵ Barry Smart, *The Sport Star: Modern Sport and the Cultural Economy of Sporting Celebrity* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 2005), 38.

⁸⁶ Joe Smalley, *More Than a Game* (San Bernadino, Calif.: Here's Life Publishers, Inc., 1981), 31, 26.

yet to produce anything approximating a theology of sport.”⁸⁷ While I argue in the following chapter that evangelicals have indeed produced a theology of sport, it is worth noting that the early decades of sports ministry reflected economic values of mass consumption, standardized production, and numerical evaluation. Sport historian Barry Smart notes that Americans were particularly prone to hero-worship during this time: “Heroic figures, seemingly representing simpler virtues, provided solace for people whose faith had been shaken by the passage of events [of war] and whose lives had been disturbed by rapid economic and technological changes.”⁸⁸ Both the population at large and evangelicals in particular were primed to accept athletic celebrities as virtuous paragons of strength and masculinity.

Sports ministry training materials promoted the idea that Christian athletics comprised a standardized set of behaviors and obligations. Pat Williams, previous General Manager for the Philadelphia 76ers, notes:

The high-visibility world of sports provides the Christian athlete with a unique platform for sharing his faith in Jesus Christ. Not only do his words tell of how Christ has changed his life, but his actions also show a difference—by the way he reacts to bad calls, by his attitude toward his opponent and by his dedication to personal excellence.⁸⁹

Christian athletes were expected to have a story of life change that they could share with any audience. Also, they were meant to emulate certain on-field behaviors that demonstrated strength of character, making the athletes’ testimonies stronger. What is interesting here is that these stories and behaviors appear as standardized and replicable.

⁸⁷ Baker, *Playing with God*, 217.

⁸⁸ Smart, *The Sport Star*, 3.

⁸⁹ Pat Williams, “Foreword” in Smalley, *More Than a Game*, 11.

Sports ministry organizations played a major role in the standardization of athletic Christian narratives and practices.

In 1959, four years after its establishment, FCA began publishing a magazine for its members entitled *The Christian Athlete*. A major component of the early issues was an feature entitled “The Huddle.” “The Huddle” consisted of an athletic themed Bible study meant for small group environments. Each article contained verses and discussion questions relating to the primary mission of FCA—the twofold obligation to demonstrate Christian behavior and to evangelize to audiences. For example, “The Huddle” from May 1959 focused on the importance of witnessing. According to the introduction, “The FCA is a witnessing fellowship. It is thus of primary importance to understand the nature of the Christian witness.” The study then worked through how to witness and the content of the Christian message.⁹⁰ The apparent lesson was that a Christian athlete must have a readily developed testimony and that this narrative could be developed through standardized teaching materials.

AIA also published a member magazine, and an early issue clarified the goals of the organization. Before shortening its name to Athletes in Action, the organization was called World Coaches and Athletes in Action (WCAIA). Bill Bright, founder of Campus Crusade for Christ, writes, “The main purpose of WCAIA is to win coaches and athletes to Christ and train them how to experience and share the abundant life with Him. These committed men are then given opportunities to coach and compete throughout the world,

⁹⁰ “The Huddle: What is a Witness?” *The Christian Athlete*, May 1959, 3.

sharing their faith in Christ.”⁹¹ Both FCA and AIA publications emphasized biblical training with the express purpose of evangelizing.

Evangelicals were fully aware of the audience potential of elite sports. The growth of sports advertising had demonstrated celebrity power to sell products and evangelicals were eager to use the same strategies to spread religious knowledge. “Arguably the entire structure of sport as a form of popular culture is ideally suited to advertising and promotional culture. It is a global, yet local and particular. It is exciting for consumers because of its *uncertainty* of outcome, yet attractive to producers and advertisers because it is increasingly *certain* in terms of scheduling, rules and commercial breaks.”⁹² This tension between certainty and uncertainty creates attentive consumers and grants sporting celebrities a unique endorsement position.

As the authors of *Sport, Culture and Advertising* note, “sport is such a potent cultural force because of its increasing permeability with other areas of social life: fashion, music, movies, television, politics; that is, it has the ability to leak, and be leaked into, key sites and moments that shape our contemporary existence.”⁹³ I would argue that sport also easily leaks into religion. The sporting celebrity is able to access multiple identities simultaneously, and Christian athletes increasingly emphasized their religion as part of their sporting identity. Christian sports celebrities became adept at using their

⁹¹ Bill Bright, “The Growth of World Coaches and Athletes in Action,” *Athletes in Action Magazine*, Spring 1967, 7.

⁹² Steven J. Jackson, David L. Andrews, and Jay Sherer, “Introduction” in *Sport, Culture and Advertising: Identities, Commodities and the Politics of Representation*, eds., Steven J. Jackson and David L. Andrews (New York: Routledge, 2005), 10.

⁹³ Ibid.

celebrity position to pursue an evangelical agenda. They began to implement practices that are still evident today such as attributing victory to God and signing autographs with a Bible verse.

Celebrity evangelism remains a provocative and effective social force within today's Christian athletic community. A magazine devoted entirely to narratives and successes of Christian athletes, *Sports Spectrum*, appeared in the 1990s. A quick search of Christianbook.com returns 387 sports related books, many the stories of Christian athletic celebrities.⁹⁴ These publications evidence a continued recognition of athletic evangelism in America. Within the largest sports ministry organizations, a strategy of combining celebrity endorsement power and individual religious experience has become a central component of athletic evangelism.

As I have shown, athletic celebrity evangelism was the impulse behind sports ministry's beginnings. This impulse was informed historically and culturally by the precedent of muscular Christianity, developments in sporting culture, and innovations in evangelism. The elevation of athletic celebrity and the standardization of evangelism techniques both belie the influence of Fordist economic logic on cultural practices. Sports ministry, a movement dedicated to manliness, sport, and evangelism, emerged through this confluence of factors. However, as I have shown, one effect of early sports ministry was to limit participation to celebrity athletes with mass appeal. While athletic celebrities remain a central part of sports ministry's project today, this group cannot account for the tens of thousands of athletes, coaches, and fans involved in contemporary

⁹⁴ Christianbook, <http://www.christianbook.com> (accessed 5 September 2008).

sports ministry. As I show in the next chapter, sports ministry underwent a significant shift to become viable as an evangelical option for those outside the celebrity sphere.

CHAPTER 3

The Making of an Athlete of God⁹⁵

True to their name, Athletes in Action (AIA) dispatched traveling teams of evangelical athletes to demonstrate athletic skill and Christian devotion. From their founding days in 1966, AIA focused on actively showing athletic prowess usually followed by a gospel presentation. One individual involved in this enterprise was a weightlifter named Wes Neal. Neal traveled with the AIA weightlifting team throughout the late 1960s with Olympic lifter Russ Knipp and AIA founder Dave Hannah. The men would use their strength to lend authority to their religious message. Neal said, “We would always bring the strongest kid in the crowd to the stage to try the lift. And, of course, he couldn’t do it. So, then they would really listen to us.”⁹⁶ Though this strategy seemed to be effective in encouraging young men to listen to the gospel, Neal felt something was amiss. AIA presented lifting weights and sharing the gospel as two separate things, and even though they happened one right after the other, the two actions did not seem to affect each other very much. In Neal’s words, “I still didn’t know how to lift weights God’s way.”⁹⁷

⁹⁵ The title for this chapter is taken from a text by Wes Neal. Wes Neal, *The Making of an Athlete of God* (Campus Crusade for Christ, 1972).

⁹⁶ Interview by author, telephone, 20 September 2008.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

Over the next few decades, Neal dedicated himself to the task of understanding how to do sports God's way. He became a prolific writer for Christian athletes. His first published work was entitled *Making of an Athlete of God* and appeared in 1972. Soon after, he founded The Institute for Athletic Perfection and republished his materials as *The Handbook on Athletic Perfection: A Training Manual for Christian Athletes*. This book has been reprinted several times, most recently published in 2000. Neal also wrote *The Handbook on Coaching Perfection* and his insights form the basis for Athletes in Action's most recent publication, *Game Day Glory*. In 2008, Neal released a DVD entitled "Doing Sport God's Way."⁹⁸ Over the course of more than forty years in sports ministry, Neal saw significant changes in the movement. The two largest changes in sports ministry since its beginnings in the mid-twentieth century were an increased attention to religious experience and a demographic shift to include women, youth athletes, and alternative sports. I argue that these two shifts are related. As sports ministry organizations shifted away from celebrity evangelism tactics and toward an exploration of sport as religious experience, they opened the door for athletes with limited celebrity potential to participate. In the following chapter, I explore this demographic shift focusing on how women came to be the majority participants in sports ministry. In this chapter, I trace sports ministry's shift in emphasis, examining the motivations and effects of turning to individual religious experience rather than solely celebrity evangelism.

⁹⁸ Wes Neal, *The Handbook on Athletic Perfection: A Training Manual for Christian Athletes* (Prescott, Ariz.: The Institute for Athletic Perfection, 1975); *The Handbook on Coaching Perfection* (Action House, 1976); John and Cindy White, *Game Day Glory: Life-Changing Principles for Sport* (Tallmadge, Ohio: S.D. Myers Publishing Services, 2006); Wes Neal and Gordon Thiessen, *Doing Sport God's Way*, DVD (Cross Training Publishing, 2008).

As chronicled in the previous chapter, the use of athletic celebrity to bring attention to Christianity was a primary tactic of sports ministry groups during their formative years. Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, sports ministry organizations presented celebrity endorsement power as a way to sell Christianity. However, as time went on, voices in the Christian athletic community began to criticize this emphasis on salesmanship and to express dissatisfaction with Christianity's inability to morally improve the sporting world. To investigate sports ministry's reframing of Christian athletic experience, I first explore the growing discontent with sporting celebrity evangelism fermenting both inside and outside of sports ministry. I then turn to Neal's texts for Christian athletes as examples of the shift toward internalized understandings of divine intention for Christian athletes. I argue that Neal's career as a weightlifter informed his work by focusing his attention on mental power over the body and pain as necessary for athletic improvement. In Neal's work, pain and suffering are valuable connection between the athlete and Christ's suffering. This connection between suffering and value is prominent in today's literature for Christian athletes. This chapter is meant to show the multiple effects of combining sport and Christianity through embodied experience. On the one hand, celebrity and salesmanship are deemphasized allowing increased participation in the movement. On the other hand, the emphasis on individual religious experience occurred through the lens of suffering as pleasing to God.

Within the Christian athletic community in the late 1960s and early 1970s, there was a feeling that Christian athletes could and should be different from non-Christian athletes, yet many noticed that their faith did not seem to affect their athletic behavior.

Neal in particular grew frustrated with sports ministry's lack of attention to Christian athletes as distinct from other kinds of celebrity athletes.

I wasn't any different from a non-Christian in my athletics. I was still nervous before competition. I still had all the same ups and downs as a non-Christian. We used to train at a gym in southern California and a lot of the college football lifters would look up to us to try to learn about being a Christian athlete. Of course, we didn't know any more about it than they did.⁹⁹

One day, Neal was lifting weights at this gym and he missed a lift. "I knew I would get pinned, so I had to push my self away from the bar. I was so frustrated that I smashed my fist on the platform." His fiancé, Peggy, approached him, asking, "Are you angry?" When Neal denied his anger, Peggy said, "Well, they all think you are," gesturing to the college football players. "I was so embarrassed and humiliated. I vowed that would never happen again. I just didn't know how to do sport God's way."¹⁰⁰

Gary Warner, editor of Fellowship of Christian Athletes' member publication *The Christian Athlete*, voiced a frustration similar to Neal's with the lack of change in his sporting behavior after his decision to become a Christian.

My faith had no practical application to my competitiveness. I was the same old person between the base lines. I cursed, I lost control, I was obsessed with winning. I would manipulate and do whatever it took to win. I slid into bases with my spikes high, and if a baserunner did not get down to the double play, I had no qualms about putting the ball between his eyes. From the bench, I heaped abuse on opponents and referees. After all, this was competition. This was being an athlete. And no one modeled a Christian difference for me to see.¹⁰¹

Neal and Warner were not the only ones to notice that Christian athletes seemed largely the same as their secular counterparts. At the same time that these two members

⁹⁹ Interview by author, telephone, 20 September 2008.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Gary Warner, *Competition* (Elgin, Ill.: David C. Cook Publishing, 1979), 45.

of the sports ministry community were growing disenchanted with celebrity evangelism, *Sports Illustrated* writer Frank Deford published a scathing critique of what he called “Sportianity.”¹⁰² According to Deford, Sportianity was a locker room religion on the rise in professional leagues that involved a declaration of Christian beliefs yet did not require ethical improvements. He wrote, “In the process of dozens of interviews with people in Sportianity, not one remotely suggested any direct effort was being considered to improve the morality of athletics.”¹⁰³ Deford conjectured that this lack of attention to sporting morality was connected to sports ministry’s dependence on athletic celebrity. According to Deford, the ministry benefited from sports’ promotion of hero-worship based on winning. Since sports ministry used the system for evangelism, sports ministers would be unlikely to seek significant changes in the organizing principles of competitive sport. “[N]o one in the movement—much less any organization—speaks out against the cheating in sport, against dirty play; no one attacks the evils of recruiting, racism or any

¹⁰² Frank Deford, “Religion and Sport,” *Sports Illustrated*, 19 April 1976, 88-102; “The Word According to Tom,” *Sports Illustrated*, 26 April 1976, 54-69; “Reaching for the Stars,” *Sports Illustrated*, 3 May 1976, 42-60.

¹⁰³ Deford, “Religion and Sport,” *Sports Illustrated*, 19 April 1976, 100. This continues to be a major critique of sports ministry from within the Christian community. Shirl Hoffman critiqued sports ministry in the 1990s for the same reason. “When sport is harnessed to the evangelistic enterprise, evangelicals become as much endorsers of the myths reinforced by popular sports as they do of the Christian gospel.” Shirl Hoffman, “Evangelicalism and the Revitalization of Religious Ritual in Sport” in *Sport and Religion*, ed. Shirl Hoffman (Champaign, Ill.: Human Kinetics Books, 1992), 121. According to a recent book by William Baker, “[Christian athletes] use sports as a means to the end of religious conversion. Gone, in the evangelical equation, are older concerns about the relation of sports to physical health or the moral lessons to be gained from athletic competition.” William Baker, *Playing With God: Religion and Modern Sport* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), 217.

of the many other well-known excesses and abuses... Sportianity seems prepared to accept athletics as is, more devoted to exploiting sport than serving it.”¹⁰⁴

This critique appeared in the first of a series of three *Sports Illustrated* articles by Deford on “Sportianity.” In the second and third articles, Deford tempered his critique somewhat and introduced “Sportians” who were interested in addressing moral issues in sport. In particular, he pointed to an article by Gary Warner and Skip Stogsdill entitled “Sports and War” that appeared in *The Christian Athlete* in 1972. In this article, Warner and Stogsdill juxtaposed pictures of injured athletes and fallen soldiers, linebackers and the front line. The authors decried the growing emphasis on winning over team cooperation and cautioned against treating the world like a sporting competition.

In the midst of the most complex time in our nation’s history, we are witnessing a phenomenal growth of our athletic institutions. Sports has become the national conversation, complete with its own peculiar grammar and vocabulary. It has absorbed our passions in its fantasy world of winners and losers. Sports has proved compatible with our view of the world as a dichotomy of winners and losers. In fact, we seem to retreat into sport in order to deny the complexity and ambiguity that marks the political, social, and religious issues of our time.¹⁰⁵

The two sports ministers argued that Christian athletes needed to take seriously the conflation of sports and war in America and rethink Christian involvement in both. “In fact, in light of Jesus a whole new conception of sports is demanded. Needless to say a re-examination of sports may be a bitter and traumatic task for a society as permeated with sports (and war) as is ours.... I believe we can anticipate a conversion of spirit that

¹⁰⁴ Deford, “Religion and Sport,” 102.

¹⁰⁵ Jerry Pile, “Sports and War,” *The Christian Athlete*, January 1972, 2-8.

will produce a new vision of what sports can be.”¹⁰⁶ Rather than using sport as a platform for witnessing, these sports ministers sought to bring Christian beliefs and practices to bear on actual athletic behavior.

Deford noted that Warner’s critique was not well-received in the Christian athletic community and implied that sports ministry was more comfortable with a sales-pitch mentality than with actual systemic change.

While athletics does not appear to have been improved by the religious blitzkrieg, the religious people who work that side of the street seem to have been colored by some of the worst attitudes found in sport. The temper of athletic religion is competitive, full of coaches and cheerleaders, with an overriding sense of wins and losses, stars and recruiting, game plans and dugout chatter.¹⁰⁷

Deford even goes to far as to suggest, “It might be a good idea right now to talk to the veteran GM in the sky about the possibility of a rebuilding year.”¹⁰⁸

Because winning is central to gaining cultural attention, Christian athletes that saw their evangelistic potential as tied to their win-loss record were motivated to win at all costs. Sport sociologist Shirl Hoffman notes that tying winning to evangelistic potential leads to athletes that understand winning as God’s will. He quotes Roger Staubach after the 1972 Super Bowl, “I had promised that it would be for God’s honor and glory, whether we won or lost. Of course the glory was better for God and me since we won, because victory gave me a greater platform from which to speak.”¹⁰⁹ This sort of affiliation between winning and God’s will was problematic for a number of reasons. It

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Deford, “Reaching for the Stars,” *Sports Illustrated*, 3 May 1976, 60.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Hoffman, “Evangelicalism and the Revitalization of Religious Ritual in Sport,” 121.

could not explain why Christian athletes might lose games. It did not take into account the that there may be Christian athletes on opposing teams. And it elevated a win-at-all-costs mentality that eclipsed any discussion of the morality of athletic behavior.

Christian quarterback Bill Glass was particularly adept at focusing on winning and ignoring moral critiques of athletic violence and brutality. He wrote in *Get in the Game*, under the heading “Good Losers Usually Lose”:

Sometimes in speaking engagements people have whispered in my ear, “Talk to ‘em about being a good loser.” I usually say, “Really, I’d like to, but I don’t have any material on the subject. Everything is bad about being a loser. There’s nothing good about it.” They reply, “Oh, you know what we mean.” “No,” I retort, “I don’t know what you mean. There’s nothing good about it; it’s all bad.”

If you get beat, after the game is over you ought to congratulate the winner. Shake his hand and tell him what a great game he played; pat him on the back. Yes, practice good sportsmanship. But, when you get in the dressing room and no one is looking, back off about ten yards and run and ram your head into the locker because you hate to lose so badly. Don’t ever be a good loser. Be a bad loser. Good losers generally lose.¹¹⁰

It was this sort of Christian spokesperson that infuriated Deford and led to his *Sports Illustrated* articles.

At the time that Deford leveled his critique of Christian involvement in sports, athletic celebrities wielded significant influence on the American population. Sports had become a political platform for the critique of social values for some prominent athletes. Tommy Smith and John Carlos's use of the 1968 Olympics as a protest against American racism provides one example of this use of athletic celebrity.¹¹¹ Additionally, a number

¹¹⁰ Bill Glass, *Get in the Game* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1965), 67-68.

¹¹¹ For an excellent assessment of the 1968 Olympics as a platform for political activism see, Amy Bass, *Not the Triumph But the Struggle: 1968 Olympics and the Making of the Black Athlete* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002); and Douglas

of authors began to critique the sporting establishment as a tool of capitalist oppression. Similar to Warner and Stogsdill, Paul Hoch's 1972 Marxist critique of big-time sport argued that football in particular functioned as an "opiate of the masses," distracting the population from "the illicit violence in today's society—riots, student uprisings, bombings, crime in the streets, and revolutionary deeds.... By contrast, the clean, hard violence of football is refreshing and reassuring, because it is done according to rules."¹¹² Hoch posited that America's sporting establishment worked to justify American involvement in Vietnam. "It goes without saying that a worker who is so busy rooting for the Yankees that he forgets that his real wages are declining is a good bet to be so busy rooting for the Yanks in Vietnam that he forgets his son might get killed there."¹¹³ Hoch's critique indicates a larger dissatisfaction with sport that permeated 1970s counter-culture. Along these lines, Deford quotes Episcopal Priest Malcolm Boyd on the dangers of combining Christianity and sport in a time of war: "It is this kind of trying [to win], the kind that this athletic religion teaches, which is killing off so many men, leaving widows. It is very dangerous right now to be trying harder. It is making us more machinelike instead of more human. We'd do better to learn how not to try so."¹¹⁴

Dave Meggyesy, pro-football player turned Marxist critic, was another voice paralleling the ideologies of sport and war. In the early 1970s, during a debate between

Hartmann, *Race, Culture, and the Revolt of the Black Athlete: The 1968 Olympic Protests and Their Aftermath* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

¹¹² Paul Hoch, *Rip Off the Big Game: The Exploitation of Sports by the Power Elite* (Garden City, N.J.: Anchor Books, 1972), 22.

¹¹³ Ibid., 82.

¹¹⁴ Deford, "Religion and Sport," 100.

several prominent coaches, athletes and sportswriters, Meggyesy critiqued the sporting establishment—"I love athletics, but the horror is what we do to each other in the name of the system." *The Christian Athlete* editor Gary Warner was in the audience and described the event.

There was no debate. The rejoinders were platitudes and clichés and, at times, so childishly sophomoric that the audience broke into laughter. I wanted to cry. Upon leaving I determined that the ramifications of competition for the Christian had to be spoken to.¹¹⁵

Warner and Neal were two sports ministers who called for a reassessment of sport from a Christian perspective, and both turned to the mind as a point of intervention. For the two sports ministers, an athlete's mental preparation was what determined the religious worth of athletics. Warner wrote, "the preparation is certainly as important, and maybe more important, than the game."¹¹⁶ By focusing on preparation and mental attitude instead of evangelism by winners, Neal and Warner were able to deemphasize celebrity in favor of individual religious experience. Neal's work in particular was quite successful in achieving this shift.

In the 1960s, Neal appeared on a television sports show in California. "The host asked me about lifting and I used that question to share the four spiritual laws, [Campus Crusade for Christ's directions for personal salvation]. Afterwards, I felt that I had done wrong on that. I didn't respect his question. I used his question to talk about something else."¹¹⁷ Because Neal's goal for Christian athletics was no longer limited to evangelism,

¹¹⁵ Warner, *Competition*, 11.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹¹⁷ Interview by author, telephone, 20 September 2008.

he came to understand his Christian athletic obligation as “to give every ounce toward something and to do it as unto the Lord.”¹¹⁸ He called this a “Total Release Performance” and understood it as a sensation of Christ-likeness, of being one with Jesus Christ. Since a Total Release Performance was Neal's athletic goal, he called this experience “winning.”

For example, I was in this tennis tournament where I was playing a 60 year old guy who had been a state champ in his youth. Everyone thought that I would clobber him, but he was creaming the daylights out of me. Peggy, my wife, knew the principles and the terminology, and she called to me from the sidelines, “Wes, are you winning?” I said, “Yes. I am. I really am.” The guy must have thought I was crazy.¹¹⁹

A Total Release Performance, or “winning” according to Neal, is contingent upon mental preparation. According to Neal, “it is your mind that the Holy Spirit engages most of the time.”¹²⁰ As such, Neal’s primary goal in his publications for Christian athletic was instruction on cultivating a mental state conducive to interaction with the Holy Spirit.

It is interesting to note that at the same time Neal was working on a theology of sport that cultivated an intense mental state, the weightlifting community in general was dedicating a substantial amount of energy to exploring mental preparation as key to athletic improvement. A number of texts appeared in the 1960s that explored the notion of visualization—vividly imagining success as a way to achieve its actualization. This thought was prevalent in self-help literature at the time including Norman Vincent

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Neal, *Handbook on Athletic Perfection*, 20.

Peale's immensely popular *The Power of Positive Thinking*.¹²¹ In the athletic realm, visualization was construed as an important component of preparation for competition. The 1960 release of *Psycho-Cybernetics* by Maxwell Maltz included several instances of using visualization to improve athletic performance. For example, under the heading "Imagination Practice Can Lower Your Golf Score," Maltz lists several professional golfers who practice in their imaginations as way to prepare for competition. According to one golfer, "[I]f you would picture the end result—'see' the ball going where you wanted it to go, and have the confidence to 'know' that it was going to do what you wanted, your subconscious would take over and direct your muscles correctly."¹²² Visualization strategies appeared in the sports ministry community, and by 1969, Bill Glass included visualization in his address to the FCA National Conference. "A large part of athletic success is in the mind of the athlete. The premise is that experiences vividly imagined have the same impact on the subconscious as experiences actually experienced."¹²³

In the weightlifting community, visualization was practically normative. As a weightlifter, Neal would know that lifting weights requires mental dedication and intense concentration to be effective. To increase muscle mass, one must work a muscle to

¹²¹ Norman Vincent Peale, *The Power of Positive Thinking* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1952). R. Marie Griffith theorizes that Peale's success combined with the historical remnants of New Thought and social pressures on appearance led to multiple publications on Christian dieting advice. See, R. Marie Griffith, *Born Again Bodies: Flesh and Spirit in American Christianity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), particularly "Pray the Weight Away: Shaping Devotional Fitness Culture," 160-205.

¹²² Maxwell Maltz, *Psycho-Cybernetics* (New York: Pocket Books, 1960), 39.

¹²³ Bill Glass, "Obsessed!", *The Christian Athlete*, January 1970, 14.

exhaustion and this requires mental stamina as well as physical endurance. Mental stamina was commonly emphasized in the literature of the day. For example, in the 1970s, Jim Murray advised the new bodybuilding trainee that one can hold a weight in one's hand and curl it up, but that "isn't really bodybuilding. To get the full bodybuilding effect on the biceps, you must flex your arms deliberately, consciously contracting the biceps, all the while *thinking* biceps."¹²⁴ Arnold Schwarzenegger took this concept a step further. He wrote in his autobiography, "I was learning more and more about the mind, about the power it has over the body. It meant having complete communication with the muscles... I locked my mind into my muscle during training, as if I'd transplanted my mind into the tissue itself. By just thinking about it, I could actually send blood to a muscle."¹²⁵

The mental component of weight training may have led Neal to focus on mental states as primary for athletic worship. He clearly states that the mind provides an access point for the Holy Spirit:

The word "mind" refers to all of our senses which are alert to external objects—the primary organ being the brain. The human mind, acting independently, can produce great works. But it can also produce chaos. It was designed by God to work in a dependent way with His Holy Spirit.¹²⁶

Since Neal understood the mind as a "meeting ground with God,"¹²⁷ much of his instruction involved creating a state of mind intentionally in tune with Jesus Christ. "I

¹²⁴ Jim Murray, *Inside Bodybuilding* (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1978), 18.

¹²⁵ Arnold Schwarzenegger with Douglas Kent Hall, *Arnold: The Education of a Bodybuilder* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1977), 88.

¹²⁶ Neal, *Handbook on Athletic Perfection*, 20.

¹²⁷ Interview by author, telephone, 30 September 2008.

picture myself as Jesus—this is not heresy; there is no way that we *are* Jesus, but I see myself as Jesus living in me. I’m not copying his behavior, but I’m in a union with His spirit.”¹²⁸ Neal describes this union as a renewing of the mind with purity. “It’s a combination of losing yourself and building yourself—less of me, more of Christ... It’s an awesome awareness.”¹²⁹

For Neal, mental clarity was made possible through isolated concentration on the Holy Spirit, which allowed an athlete to experience a Total Release Performance, an “awesome awareness” of renewed purity. This description differs very little from secular descriptions of athletic pleasure. For example, take bodybuilder Frank Zane’s description of his experience of training with intense concentration:

I proved to myself that if my concentration was keen enough, I could close the breach between myself and the exercise apparatus when I worked with it. I riveted my attention to the proper form of the exercise to the extent that no external environment existed for me. I became compatible with my workout. Distractions were filtered out. You have to personally get into it and work at it to experience what I mean. It transcends simple training. You float like a cork in a heavy sea.¹³⁰

This falls in line with Neal’s ideas. The feeling of total release is made possible through mental concentration.

The difference between Frank Zane’s description and Neal’s description is theological. For Neal, this sensation is a gift from a pleased God; for non-Christians, it is

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Frank Zane, “Zane’s Unit Training for Delts,” *Muscle Builder and Power*, May 1975, 13.

self-induced. Arnold Schwarzenegger's autobiography includes a conversation with a training mate that demonstrates this theological difference:

Helmut insisted that if I achieved something in my life, I shouldn't thank God for it, I should thank myself. It was the same way if something bad happened. I shouldn't ask God for help, I should help myself. He asked me if I had ever prayed for my body. I confessed I had. He said that if I wanted a great body, I had to build it. Nobody else could. Least of all God.¹³¹

One difference between Christian athletes and non-Christian athletes is that Christian athletes believe that God can and will help them improve in their sport. Neal emphasizes that this results from mental intentionality, arguing that if an athlete opens his or her mind to Jesus, athletic training and performance will improve.

Your mind was designed by God to express your praise of Him. Your body was designed by God to express that praise in action. In your performance, as you praise God both mentally and physically, you will be doing the very thing for which you were designed. By performing the way you were designed, your athletic ability is developed to the maximum potential.¹³²

Neal is careful to point out that developing to one's maximum potential does not mean winning in the traditional sense. Your maximum potential may not be as great as your opponent's. However, Neal does argue that an athlete can never achieve his or her full potential without the help of Jesus Christ.

Needless to say, Neal's system is only applicable to Christian athletes. He is clear that it is only through heartfelt acceptance of Jesus Christ that one is able use the principles he developed. "I can't teach this to a non-Christian. You would be counterfeiting if you tried to do it, and it wouldn't work."¹³³ True to his training by Bill

¹³¹ Schwarzenegger, *Arnold: The Education of a Bodybuilder*, 32.

¹³² Neal, *Handbook on Athletic Perfection*, 72.

¹³³ Interview by author, telephone, 20 September 2008.

Bright, Neal's training manuals open with an explanation of The Four Spiritual Laws as the recommended method for commitment to Christianity.¹³⁴ According to Neal, an athlete is able to apply Neal's principles after a conversion decision. He writes, "The perfect athletic performance is Jesus Christ living and performing through you. If you believe in Him (totally rely upon Him), you have taken the first step in experiencing the perfect athletic performance."¹³⁵ Rather than training evangelists, Neal wanted to change the way Christian athletes understood athletic performance. By describing and promising a Total Release Performance to the Christian athlete, Neal is invoking the sensations of athletic pleasure that stem from training with intense concentration.

Pleasure is widely recognized as a component of most athletic training and competition, but Christian athletes see this pleasure as a gift from God. Warner described it as "breaking through 'the wall' away from the pain and entering a spiritual experience in which body and spirit intermingle in a joyous dance... that coming together, that intimate ecstasy when one senses he has arrived at the quintessential harmony of life.... The truest beauty of sport comes when one isolates and enters this private, enchanted world."¹³⁶ By presenting athletic pleasure as religious experience, Neal and Warner argue that God approves of Christian athleticism. According to Neal, athletic ability is a gift from God, and God is pleased when athletic ability is used to its fullest potential. He wrote, "Your athletic abilities are a gift from God. Since you are an athlete, it is logical

¹³⁴ For a detailed discussion of The Four Spiritual Laws, see chapter two, 45-47.

¹³⁵ Neal, *Handbook on Athletic Perfection*, 11.

¹³⁶ Warner, *Competition*, 27-28.

for you to offer the best quality of your abilities to Him as an expression of your love.”¹³⁷

This understanding elevated athletic activity as a praise and worship experience rather than as a platform for evangelistic witnessing.

Though Neal and Warner discuss athletic pleasure, it is athletic pain that is most prominent in literature for Christian athletes. As Shirl Hoffman notes, “Pain and discomfort are not incidental conditions of sport competition, they are central, the indispensable relish for mellowing the raw taste of pleasure.”¹³⁸ For Neal, and for many other evangelical Christians, Jesus’ crucifixion is the central and organizing theological principle of Christianity. Jesus’ death is understood as the extreme example of sacrifice demanded by an allegiance to God. Neal used this understanding of the pain of crucifixion to frame his own athletic pain. “You are meant to present yourself as a living sacrifice. Sport can be an opportunity to express love for Jesus for what he did [by also engaging in a physical sacrifice].”¹³⁹

For Warner as well, pain was central to understanding the Christian athletic enterprise. Warner recognized that in athletics, improvement is often tried to suffering. He writes, “After being refined in the fire of pain, there were tangible results: my body toughened; my mind and body did new things together; I formed special relationships; I gained new skills; I had new appreciation for the gifts of others; I found a new identity.”¹⁴⁰ While Warner is careful to caution athletes and coaches against

¹³⁷ Ibid., 63.

¹³⁸ Hoffman, “Evangelicalism and the Revitalization of Religious Ritual in Sport,” 119.

¹³⁹ Interview by author, telephone, 20 September 2008.

¹⁴⁰ Warner, *Competition*, 78.

overindulging in pain, he is certain that pain provides a key connection between sport and Christ.

The conflation of athletic pleasure and athletic pain can be found in most sports, but weightlifting in particular offers a provocative window on this relationship.

Weightlifting emphasizes the individual dimension of sport. According to Neal, “In weightlifting, there’s no opponent to distract you. Four hundred pounds is four hundred pounds any day of the week. You can’t win because your opponent messed up.”¹⁴¹ With no opponent to define oneself against, the weightlifter must rely on self-motivation and mental concentration. As sports scholar William Hoverd points out, there are parallels between Christ-like suffering and modern weight training:

For Christianity, the ideal body is the suffering body of Christ. His suffering is the suffering of humanity and his resurrection is the promise of salvation and the final alleviation of bodily pain and suffering. At first any comparison between the suffering Christ and the narcissistic ambitions of the gym goer seems absurd. However, the saints who emulated the physical suffering of Christ tortured their bodies ultimately for purifying the spirit in the search of salvation. The gym goer disciplines and trains their body through controlled torture and infliction of pain. The only way to create muscle is by breaking old muscle and burning fat; both processes are simultaneously painful and purifying.¹⁴²

Weightlifting is a sport that relies on, even requires, the conflation of pain and pleasure.

The soreness that results from weight training is understood as a valuable indication of progress.¹⁴³

¹⁴¹ Interview by author, telephone, 20 September 2008.

¹⁴² William Hoverd, *Working Out My Salvation: The Contemporary Gym And The Promise Of Self Transformation* (New York: Meyer and Meyer Sport, 2005), 101-102.

¹⁴³ “Seeing the new changes in my body, feeling them, turned me on. It was the first time I’d ever felt every one of my muscles. It was the first time those sensations had registered in my mind, the first time my mind knew my thighs, calves, and forearms were more than just limbs. I felt the muscles in my triceps aching, and I knew why they were

Pain was deeply connected to progress in Neal's sport, and that may explain why pain featured prominently in his advice for Christian athletes. Using the example of Christ's crucifixion, Neal explained to Christian athletes that bodily sacrifice is an expression of love for God. He advises Christian athletes to imagine themselves as Jesus and therefore as capable of experiencing sacrificial pain for God. "I have a cycling route that I do. At first, I really loved the downhill, but now, I've come to love the uphill. I love feeling the tension and agony in my muscles, and I push through the pain as a love expression for the Lord. As a Christian, I know that God uses a broken person, God uses an empty vessel. And, as I become dead to myself and filled with Jesus, I can push through the pain barrier."¹⁴⁴ Neal encouraged the Christian athlete to emulate Jesus' ultimate endurance of the pain and agony of crucifixion. He wrote:

It was the attitude of Jesus that brought Him through punishing physical torment that would have stopped other men in the starting blocks... You must have Jesus' attitude in your athletic performance if you are to conform to his likeness [and maximize your athletic potential].¹⁴⁵

According to Neal, Jesus' pain was part of God's plan, and therefore athletes should understand their own pain as God's plan for them to improve athletically and spiritually.

Pushing through the pain barrier is one way to get the most out of a workout. It is also tied to a masculinizing sporting project that equates manliness, sacrifice, and suffering. According to Michael Messner:

called triceps—because there are three muscles in there. They were registered in my mind, written there with sharp little jabs of pain. I learned that this pain meant progress. Each time my muscles were sore from a workout, I knew they were growing." Schwarzenegger, *Arnold: The Education of a Bodybuilder*, 16.

¹⁴⁴ Interview by author, telephone, 30 September 2008.

¹⁴⁵ Neal, *The Handbook on Athletic Perfection*, 32

Athletes who are “playing with pain,” “giving up their body for the team,” or engaging in obviously highly dangerous plays or maneuvers are consistently portrayed as heroes; conversely, those who remove themselves from games because of injuries raise questions about their character, their manhood.¹⁴⁶

Playing with pain and understanding pain as purposeful aligns Christian athletes with larger ideologies of sport that value bodily sacrifice. Many male athletes are told that their manliness is contingent upon their ability to sacrifice their bodies. Meggyesy points to this understanding as one that allows a coach to control players psychologically. He writes that after missing a tackle,

[My coach] began to chew me out at half-time. He said I was “afraid to stick my nose in there,” as he always liked to put it, adding that I looked “almost feminine” in making the tackle. This sort of attack on a player’s manhood is a coach’s doomsday weapon. And it almost always works, for the players have wrapped up their identity in their masculinity, which is eternally precarious for it not only depends on not exhibiting fear on the playing field, but is also something that can be given and withdrawn by any coach at his pleasure.¹⁴⁷

In this example, a player’s manliness is determined by two things—one’s fearlessness in the face of oncoming pain and one’s devotion to the coach. The coach, as the authority on a player’s manliness, has the ability to test and evaluate this quality based on a player’s relationship to pain.

This ideology appears in Neal’s work. Submission to authority and ability to push through pain are central components of his advice for Christian athletes. Submitting to one’s coach is compared to Jesus’ submission to God through sacrificing his body on the cross. If the athlete is meant to imagine him or herself as Jesus, the coach takes on the role of God by demanding physical sacrifice. In Neal’s *Handbook on Athletic Perfection*,

¹⁴⁶ Messner, *Taking the Field: Women, Men, and Sports* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 120-121.

¹⁴⁷ Dave Meggyesy, *Out of Their League* (Berkeley, Calif.: Ramparts Press, 1970), 181.

he tells athletes, “The chain-of-command is a biblical concept designed by God to help us function at our maximum effectiveness.”¹⁴⁸ He tells the story of not wanting to continue doing an exercise that was causing him pain:

When my coach told me to continue practicing the lift that caused my shoulders to ache, I realized that my role in the chain-of-command was to obey his leading. It didn’t matter if I agreed with his approach or not. As long as he was my coach, his responsibility was to give me instructions and my responsibility was to follow them.¹⁴⁹

Neal encourages the Christian athlete to not only follow the coach’s instructions, but to do so as an enthusiastic servant to the coach, and by extension to God.

The reason my weightlifting workout went so successfully when I returned to the platform to lift was because I looked upon myself as a *doulos* [servant] to my coach. I wanted my actions to be the instant and complete response to my coach’s desire for me. I knew that by being obedient to my coach, I was also being obedient to God.¹⁵⁰

In this way, obedience and pain are presented as two facets of Christ-likeness that athletes should emulate in their practices and competitions.

The shift from salesman to suffering athlete as the appropriate role for the Christian in sport indicates significant change in sports ministry from the 1950s to the 1970s. As I have shown, this shift emerged from a critique of celebrity evangelism and a desire to address athletics on the level of behavior and intention rather than publicity. The resulting theology of sport, as developed by Neal, aligns with the sporting values of mental concentration, playing with pain, and obedience to the coach. Wes Neal understood suffering as a way to connect with God. For him, the athletic struggle was an

¹⁴⁸ Neal, *The Handbook on Athletic Perfection*, 88.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 89.

ambivalent expression of purposeful pain and absolute obedience. As Richard Dyer points out, these qualities form a paradox of masculinity that permeates cultural understandings of both manliness and whiteness. “This sets up a dynamic of aspiration, of striving to be, to transcend, and to go on striving in the face of the impossibility of transcendence. Such striving (which in women must also be passive) is registered as suffering, self-denial and self-control, and also material achievement, if it can be construed as the temporary and partial triumph of the mind over matter. These constitute something of a thumbnail sketch of the white ideal.”¹⁵¹ It is unlikely that Neal was intentionally invoking an ideal type of white masculinity when he constructed his theology, but, at the time that he was writing, his audience would have been largely composed of white men. In 1970, Gary Warner called on Christian athletes “to be total men, men who actually stretch their still strong influence to every corner of society instead of merely trotting out clichés about ‘harnessed hero-worship.’”¹⁵² While Warner and Neal seemed to be masculinity, sports ministry was becoming more and more open to female involvement. While the movement has remained largely white, the number of female Christian athletes involved has increased dramatically; women now outnumber men in most sports ministry organizations. In the following chapter, I investigate the factors leading to this gender shift.

¹⁵¹ Richard Dyer, *White* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 17.

¹⁵² Gary Warner, “The Three R’s of the Soaring Seventies,” *The Christian Athlete*, January 1970, 23.

CHAPTER 4

Sports Ministry and Female Athletes

By the 1970s, sports ministry was a firmly established wing of evangelical culture. However, there was a growing anxiety that the larger public perceived Christian athletes as weak and effeminate. In 1973, Dave Hannah reassured Athlete in Action members, “Christianity is for men. It’s not a crutch, but a vital, living, relationship with God. Through this experience, day by day, He allows us to maximize our mental preparation to meet life as men and as athletes.”¹⁵³ Hannah’s statement comes shortly after Title IX, legislation that drastically increased sporting opportunities for women. Over the following decades, though Hannah and others continued to assure Christian athletes that “Christianity is for men,” female Christian athletes would become the dominant population in sports ministry organizations. I argue that this demographic shift is linked to the theological shift described in the previous chapter. As noted, the emergent theology of sport in the 1970s shifted sports ministry’s emphasis away from celebrity evangelism and toward individual religious experience. This allowed athletes with little access to celebrity status (like women) to engage in Christian athleticism by understanding their athletic engagement as a pursuit of Christ-likeness. For female Christian athletes, this led to a double struggle. As athletes, they are transgressing in a

¹⁵³ Dave Hannah, “Training Table,” *Athletes in Action Magazine*, Spring 1973, 5.

traditionally male realm, and as evangelical Christian women, they are taught to value feminine submission as God's plan for women.¹⁵⁴ Female Christian athletes must, on the one hand, emulate Jesus, a character presented in evangelical athletic circles as highly masculine. And, on the other hand, they must reassure the world at large and their evangelical community that they are traditionally feminine. As such, female Christian athletes struggle to assert traditional femininity within a realm that emphasizes sports as manly and gender deviance as evidence of a poor relationship with God.

This chapter examines strategies that sports ministers promote for female athletes to balance femininity and athleticism. Sports ministry's acknowledgement of female athletes is indebted to Title IX and the subsequent growth of sports for women in the United States. I begin my analysis with this legislation. By the 1990s, about a generation after the 1972 legislation, the icon of the female athlete featured prominently in American culture. Recognizing the growing population of female athletes, sports ministers began producing evangelical training materials aimed specifically at this group. Following my treatment of Title IX, I investigate these texts, focusing on two key pieces of advice meant to preserve femininity for the female Christian athlete—appearance and heteronormativity. I treat these two factors in turn and ultimately conclude that female Christian athletes are able to use evangelical Christianity as a marker of femininity that offsets cultural perceptions of female athletes as mannish or sexually deviant. Sports ministry functions as an affirmation of traditional gender roles for a population often

¹⁵⁴ A number of authors have explored submission within evangelical Christianity as a form of power. See in particular Brenda Brasher, *Godly Women: Fundamentalism and Female Power* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1998) and R. Marie Griffith, *God's Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

presented as gender deviant. Female athletes constitute the majority membership in today's largest sports ministry organizations, and understanding how sports ministry treats this population is an important part of understanding this growing phenomenon.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the language of equal opportunity and equal rights, largely promoted by the black civil rights movement, the American Indian and Chicano movements, and the women's and gay liberation movements, became a pervasive way to discuss relationships between different groups in American society. Organized feminists were able to draw on this language to present disparities in athletic resources as an explicitly political problem.¹⁵⁵ Sports historian Susan Cahn points to sport as a microcosm for the struggle for women's rights:

The image of sport as a battleground in the "war between the sexes" was a recurring one, suggesting that many observers understood women's athletic demands for equality as part of a deeper societal rift over the distribution of power and the definition of masculinity and femininity.¹⁵⁶

Title IX proved to be an important part of this battle. The legislation guaranteed equal funds for men and women in all institutions that receive federal funding.¹⁵⁷ At first, institutions were unclear as to whether athletics were included under Title IX. And, following the compliance deadline in 1978, there were several legal clarifications on the exact meaning of the legislation. In 1984, the Supreme Court mandated a narrow

¹⁵⁵ Susan K. Cahn, *Coming on Strong: Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Women's Sport* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), 246-279.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 256.

¹⁵⁷ Title IX reads in part, "No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any educational programs or activities receiving federal financial assistance." *Women's Sports and Fitness* 14 (January/February 1992): 28, quoted in Cahn, *Coming on Strong*, 250.

interpretation of Title IX, which made it difficult to challenge sex discrimination in athletics. However, in 1988 with the passage of the Civil Rights Restoration Act, legislative challenges to sex discrimination in sport dramatically increased. In the 1990s, enforcement of Title IX compliance grew, due to a number of lawsuits against colleges and universities and the Clinton administration's focus on enforcing the policy.¹⁵⁸ When Title IX was first passed, only one in every nine women participated in sports. By the early twenty-first century, the statistics were one in 2.5.¹⁵⁹ This has resulted in not only an increase in female athletes, but in an increase of female athletic careers—as professional athletes, coaches, administrators, sports writers, and newscasters.

¹⁵⁸ There are several factors that made Title IX difficult to implement. The most important measure of compliance with Title IX is the measure of an institution's "substantive proportionality." This means that there should be the same ratio of female athletes to female students as there are male athletes to male students. In a recent evaluation of Title IX compliance, researchers found that institutions with football teams and with high numbers of female students generally have more difficulty implementing Title IX. What is important for our purposes, however, is that, in moving toward compliance with Title IX, high schools, colleges and universities have dramatically expanded athletic opportunities for women. See Deborah J. Anderson, John J. Cheslock and Ronald G. Ehrenberg, "Gender Equity in Intercollegiate Athletics: Determinants of Title IX Compliance," *Journal of Higher Education* 77 (2006): 225-250. The formation of the Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics for Women (CIAW) in 1966, and its successor, the Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women (AIAW), founded in 1971, drew attention to athletic inequalities at the college level. "At a typical mid-western university in the Big Ten Conference, men's athletics received thirteen hundred dollars for every dollar spent on the women's program. A mid-Atlantic university allocated nineteen hundred dollars for women's sport while granting men's athletics over two million dollars. On the West Coast, Washington State University appropriated less than 1 percent of its two-million-dollar athletic budget for women's sports." Cahn, *Coming on Strong*, 250. Disparities were apparent as well at the professional level as women's earnings were often a small percentage of men's for the same sport. This was due in large part to the limited exposure of women's athletics, with NBC and CBS dedicating less than 2 percent of their athletic coverage to women's sports. Bill Gilbert and Nancy Williamson, "Sport is Unfair to Women," *Sports Illustrated*, 28 May 1973, 90-91, quoted in Susan Cahn, *Coming on Strong*.

¹⁵⁹ Leslie Heywood and Shari Dworkin, *Built to Win: The Female Athlete as Cultural Icon* (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), xxi.

In the 1970s, there were female athletes and coaches involved with sports ministry, but they were a minority and did not receive as much attention as their male athletic counterparts. Most women affiliated with the movement were wives of athletes or coaches. They would travel with their husbands and while the men would compete and evangelize, the women would host Bible study groups. For example, Athletes in Action's traveling wrestlers brought their wives along on tour, and "the four team wives formed a singing group and spoke or performed in sororities, churches, dorms, Bible studies, and everywhere their husbands competed."¹⁶⁰

One of the few unmarried women to attend FCA summer conferences in 1970 was a Roman Catholic nun named Catherine Lucas. She was invited by her priest who said that if ministers could bring their wives, he could bring her. On the plane, she sat next to NFL player Jerry Stovall, also traveling to the FCA conference. When he found out she was going, she later recounted, "He wrinkled his nose and asked, 'What's a girl going to an FCA conference for?'"¹⁶¹ While the men at the camp gathered in "huddles," Lucas ran the "cuddle" group for wives. Throughout her story in *The Christian Athlete*, Lucas professed an ignorance of the sports world and an active respect for male athletes. Like other women in sports ministry, she promoted the idea that women should be supportive wives and mothers to athletes in their families. Lucas's story demonstrates the comparative rarity of female participation in sports ministry before Title IX and the sorts of activities female participants engaged in at the time.

¹⁶⁰ Kathleen Kaiser, "Men of Destiny," *Athletes in Action Magazine*, Fall 1982, 25.

¹⁶¹ Catherine Lucas, "The Swinging Nun," *The Christian Athlete*, October 1970, 12-13.

In general, 1970s sports ministry recognized women as wives to coaches or mothers to athletes, rarely as athletes or coaches themselves. In 1970, *The Christian Athlete* published results from a questionnaire distributed to coaches' wives at FCA conferences nationwide. Author Skip Stogsdill wanted to investigate what it was like to be a coach's wife. The article presented the many struggles that coaches' wives face including their husband's lack of job security, the time demands of a coaching career, and feeling neglected in favor of the team. Stogsdill presented these difficulties as "deep-rooted resentments," quoting one wife as saying, "Often I'm so frustrated by the amount of time my husband spends coaching that I threaten to burn down the gym and plow up the playing field."¹⁶² The questionnaire asked wives to give advice to the young woman considering marrying a coach. The first item on the list was, "Be as attractive and congenial as possible," followed closely by, "Be prepared to spend many hours and evenings alone."¹⁶³ Stogsdill concluded the article with a directive to the coach, "Coach, your wife dislikes plenty of things about your job, especially the hours and her subsequently having to wear two hats. Yet she believes the dividends far outweigh the drawbacks. Because she's a woman for all seasons, she loves you year-round for what you are. You belong to a breed of men most blessed."¹⁶⁴ This example demonstrates sports ministry's limited recognition of roles for women within the sports world. It also reinforced the differentiation of gender roles within marriage—the husband as active and the wife as passive and supportive.

¹⁶² Skip Stogsdill, "A Woman For All Seasons," *The Christian Athlete*, November 1970, 12.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

Dominant evangelical Christian gender understandings in contemporary America rely on this inherent dualism that presents men as active and powerful while women are seen as passive and submissive. Religious studies scholar Sally Gallagher points out that gender difference has far-reaching implications for evangelical Christians. Evangelicals often posit men as rightful spiritual leaders and God's chosen heads of households, invoking this ideology as a mark of distinction from non-Christians.¹⁶⁵ Gender roles and understandings serve as a marker of evangelical commitment, and Gallagher theorizes that gender understandings stem from reading the truths of the Bible as absolute and enduring. "In this process of interpretation, questions about gender and authority take on symbolic significance as litmus tests of the acceptance of biblical authority overall."¹⁶⁶ Since God is understood as male and as a father, the authority of God is related to His gender, and therefore, to undermine the naturalness of gender hierarchy is to undermine God's authority.

For contemporary evangelicals, acceding authority to husbands is not just a pragmatic way to resolve the ambiguities of contemporary life. These ideas of a gendered hierarchy of authority are not just relational; they are reality, embodied in physiology and stretching throughout the created order to the person of God.¹⁶⁷

In evangelical Christianity, the nature of the divine is dependent on gendered understandings of power and authority.

These understandings of gender make marriage an important relationship in the evangelical Christian community, often presented as second only to one's relationship

¹⁶⁵ Sally K. Gallagher, *Evangelical Identity and Gendered Family Life* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2003).

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 171.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 172.

with Jesus Christ. Evangelical Christians understand successful marriages as dependent on the correct differentiation of male and female roles. As demonstrated in the 1970 article above, wifely obligations entail adjusting to a husband's career without complaint. This is still invoked in contemporary sports ministry publications for coaches' wives, including a series of articles in FCA's *Sharing the Victory* called "Behind the Bench." "Behind the Bench" was launched in 2006 by Chris Steckel, wife of FCA president Les Steckel. The initial article by Chris Steckel begins with her story of meeting her future husband during a flag football match. She writes that, after she made the game-winning touchdown, "a strong arm reached down and lifted me to my feet. 'Hey,' he said. 'What was your name again? And would you like to go out with me?'" It was the beginning of a life together...31 years of marriage and a lifetime of football."¹⁶⁸ The article continues:

As a coach's wife, I knew the long hours of the season that took him away, the packing of boxes I'd unpacked too recently, and the effort of trying to ignore the criticism of the Monday morning quarterbacks who were calling for his job and our livelihood. But I knew, too, why God had called him to coach and called me to be a coach's wife. It was to influence young lives in a way unique to a coach and his family.¹⁶⁹

Steckel's understanding that she was called to be coach's wife highlights a larger understanding within the evangelical community that women are defined by their marriage. "Behind the Bench," as a ministry directed at coaches' wives, simultaneously elevates marriage as an important relationship and eclipses female coaches altogether. While sports ministry has been more and more likely in recent decades to recognize

¹⁶⁸ Chris Steckel, "Behind the Bench Exclusive," *Sharing the Victory*, <http://www.fca.org/BehindtheBench/Articles/2006JanFeb.lsp> (accessed 8 October 2008).

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

women as athletes and as coaches, emphasis on marriage and gender roles continues to proliferate in texts for female Christian athletes.

The 1990s ushered in a new era in women's sports. A generation after Title IX, more women than ever were growing up with increased access to athletics and therefore, more women than ever were pursuing careers in professional sports. The 1996 Olympics, dubbed by NBC "The Year of the Women," boasted a higher percentage of female athletes than ever before.¹⁷⁰ Partly due to the publicity and victory of the Women's US Olympic basketball team, the NBA Board of Governors approved the concept of the WNBA, which began its first competitive season in 1997. Additionally, the US Women's soccer team won the FIFA Women's World Cup in 1999, with perhaps the most memorable moment being Brandi Chastain's victory celebration after scoring the Cup-winning penalty shot against China. As male soccer players frequently do, she took off her jersey and waved it over her head, causing a scandal by revealing her sports bra and torso. However, the resulting commotion was only possible because so many people were watching; Chastain's sports bra was seen by an estimated viewing audience of 40 million.¹⁷¹ The increased attention to women in sport in the 1990s led sport scholars Leslie Heywood and Shari Dworkin to claim in 2003, "Female athletes were once oddities, goddesses, or monsters, exceptions to every social rule. Now the female athlete

¹⁷⁰ David Andrews questions whether NBC's coverage strategies reinforce gendered understandings of women's propensity for emotional narratives. See, "Gendered Olympic Vitality," in David Andrews *Sport-Commerce-Culture: Essays on Sport in Late Capitalist America* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006), 53-65.

¹⁷¹ "FIFA Women's World Cup - USA 1999," <http://www.fifa.com/tournaments/archive/tournament=103/edition=4644/overview.html> (accessed July 1, 2007).

is an institution.”¹⁷² By this, they mean that female athletes are now an accepted part of sporting culture making women in sport subject to the same social and commercial forces that inform sport generally.

Female athletes began to appear in increased numbers in sports ministry. According to sports minister Dave Branon, not only were women more likely to become athletes, coaches, and sports administrators, but “Christian women are now getting to enjoy the benefits of using sports as a tool for telling others about Jesus Christ. What was once a mostly male domain now offers avenues for women.”¹⁷³ Branon’s book, *Competitor’s Edge: Women Athletes Talk About Sports and Their Faith*, written in 1998, contains the testimonies of 16 high profile female Christian athletes. As noted in the previous chapter, Christian athletic experiences are often told in terms of pain and suffering with athletic sacrifice comparable to Christ’s sacrifice. What is striking about Branon’s book is that the narratives of these female Christian athletes invoke similar understandings of struggle and hardship. From Michelle Akers struggle with Chronic Fatigue and Immune Dysfunction Syndrome to Kim Braatz-Voisard’s fight against alcoholism and the numerous accounts dealing with injury and loss, the Christian women’s athletic narratives mirrored men’s in content and format. For example, WNBA player Ruthie Bolton-Holifield’s advice to young girls is:

If you set goals, and you don’t achieve them, it’s because you didn’t want to....
You’re in control of your actions and that way you react to a situation. Never

¹⁷² Heywood and Dworkin, *Built to Win*, xvi.

¹⁷³ Dave Branon *Competitor’s Edge: Women Athletes Talk About Sports and Their Faith* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1998), 13.

give up, and stay committed. Set goals, work toward your goals, keep a positive attitude, and be willing to sacrifice whatever it takes to reach your goal.¹⁷⁴

This emphasis on personal control and sacrifice reflects assumptions regarding valuable athletic qualities. And, as shown in the previous chapter, these athletic qualities are often presented as signs of manliness. Bolton-Holifield's directive to female athletes undermines the idea that men solely possess these qualities but reinforces the idea that pain and sacrifice are required for athletic success.

Karen Drollinger, a female Christian athlete with a long history of involvement with Athletes in Action and Fellowship of Christian Athletes, published a similar book in 1990 entitled *Grace and Glory: Profiles of Faith and Courage in the Lives of Top Women Athletes*. Drollinger profiles female athletes in multiple sports, emphasizing their femininity and commitment to Christianity. She writes, "I have chosen to highlight their feminine qualities because I fully believe femininity fulfills a woman's godly qualities. Men and women, though equal in their positions before God, were created for different roles."¹⁷⁵ In emphasizing femininity, Drollinger is clear that female Christian athletes should be firmly invested in gender difference. She quotes Rachel McLish, a 1980s female bodybuilding champion who left the sport to protest the use of steroids, claiming the drugs over-masculinized women.

Using steroids never appealed to me. I have never even flirted with the idea, because I thought it was horrible. *And* it went against my philosophy of why you lift weights in the first place—to make your body *more* feminine, *more* attractive, *more* healthy. There's no way—win and destroy my body at the same time? *And* become ugly?

¹⁷⁴ Quoted in Branon, *Competitor's Edge*, 58-59.

¹⁷⁵ Karen Drollinger, *Grace and Glory: Profiles of Faith and Courage in the Lives of Top Women Athletes* (Dallas, Tex.: Word Publishing, 1990), xi-xii.

What they were doing was just the opposite: tearing down their bodies by using drugs and steroids just for the sake of winning. What I see now in many women bodybuilders represents a perversion of the female gender. The competition and what you see on TV with the extreme muscularity, the he/she looking women and the androgynous look is really perverted.¹⁷⁶

It was always important to be all you can be as a woman. Once you give that up, you lose. You lose everything when you lose your identity and try to become something you physically cannot be. You might win a competition, but you lose everything you have as a woman—your identity—that’s YOU!¹⁷⁷

McLish is highly invested in demonstrable gender difference. She presents being a woman as the core of one’s identity, pointing to any blurring of gender distinction as perversion. In this way, preserving gender difference is presented as a primary goal for the female Christian athlete.

At the same time that they are meant to demonstrate femininity, female Christian athletes are expected to engage in a struggle toward Christ-likeness that mirrors the masculine struggle that Wes Neal highlighted in his *Handbook on Athletic Perfection*.¹⁷⁸ Like the fictional athletes in Neal’s work, the female athletes in the FCA/AIA publication for women, *In Pursuit*, place a high value on understanding pain as purposeful and discipline as necessary for Christian living. Like her male counterparts, the female Christian athlete is encouraged to understand athletic pain as part of God’s plan and see injuries as a strategy God uses to communicate with humans. The female Christian authors of “On the Sideline: In Pursuit of Growing Stronger through Suffering” remind their readers, “As athletes, we have the advantage of understanding this concept of

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 161

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 160.

¹⁷⁸ Wes Neal, *The Handbook on Athletic Perfection: A Training Manual for Christian Athletes* (Prescott, Ariz.: The Institute for Athletic Perfection, 1975). See chapter three for an in depth discussion of this text.

enduring pain for a greater good... we can find strength in knowing our suffering has a purpose.... Because there is purpose in suffering, there is also comfort in suffering.”¹⁷⁹

As noted in the previous chapter, athletes understand pain as a necessary part of athletic improvement. If an athletic performance is a form of worshipping God, then God is pleased by the experience of working through pain in the process of improvement. For Christian athletes, this is comforting because it gives athletic pain a religious meaning.

Female access to purposeful pain may be a step toward gender equality, but it is not unproblematic.¹⁸⁰ William Hoverd’s work on the modern gym begins to explore how Christian athletic ideals might be more complicated for women:

It has been women, and not men, who have taken the brunt of the blame for the ‘fall’ from Eden. This blame has manifested itself in negative associations of women’s bodies with temptation. Eve’s sins were those of gluttony, giving into temptation and then tempting Adam with the fruit of the tree of knowledge. As a result women have traditionally had to be extremely vigorous in their religious and social practices to keep their sense of purity... A body that is muscular is the ideal body that represents both efficiency and health. This seems to be a universal

¹⁷⁹ Cindy Berry, Kim Nero, and Cindy White, “On the Sideline: In Pursuit of Growing Stronger through Suffering,” *In Pursuit*, 2001, 8.

¹⁸⁰ As Heywood and Dworkin note in their study of the female athlete as a cultural icon, the new attention given to female athletes is just as problematic as it has always been for men. Female athletes are expected to conform to coaching demands of machine-like performance: “If athletes train to respond as a machine, disassociating from pain, the consequences are psychological as well as physical, for they learn to respond to external cues to the exclusion of the internal, and learn to disregard feelings (or blame themselves for the feelings).” Heywood and Dworkin argue that, while female athletes were achieving the machine-like status long at stake for male athletes, their male counterparts were achieving a level of sexual commercial exploitation unheard of before the 1990s. Theories about the “Adonis complex,” a male infatuation with an ideal body standard garnered attention as more and more men confessed to feelings of physical inadequacy. Heywood and Dworkin, *Built to Win*, 50, 103. This sort of gender anxiety reversal has complicated gender understandings, and sports ministry organizations are constantly negotiating the tenuous line between gender equality in sports and gender difference in relationships.

state that is applicable to the bodies of both males and females although the ideal remains ever more complicated for women.¹⁸¹

Hoverd's analysis reminds us that women are subject to different social and religious constraints than men. This is especially true in the sporting world and in conservative Christianity where women are positioned beneath men hierarchically.

Although societal acceptance of female athleticism has grown, female athletes engage in a struggle to assert and preserve traditional femininity, especially regarding their sexuality. According to Susan Cahn:

Whereas in the past, all women athletes were viewed as stepping over a border into masculine terrain, today that boundary has shifted. Women can compete, even excel, in sports as long as they demonstrate that they are sexually interested in and accessible to men. Anything short of compliance, however, marks an athlete as masculine and sexually aberrant. In contemporary sport lesbianism has come to mark the new line of athletic deviance. The pernicious stereotype of mannish lesbians sustains the masculine symbolism of sport, while within athletic culture lesbian athletes are shunned as secretive figures whose dangerous sexuality could topple all the painstakingly won achievements of women's sport.¹⁸²

This sort of tension between femininity and athleticism is a very real problem for today's women athletes. Because gender is such an important category for evangelical Christians, women in sports ministry have developed explicit tools for understanding what it means to be a woman in order to avoid accusations regarding sexuality and gender. This makes sports ministry an effective way to offset suspicions regarding gender deviance. By explicitly identifying as an evangelical Christian and participating in the conservative gender framework that informs evangelical Christianity, female

¹⁸¹ William Hoverd, *Working Out My Salvation: The Contemporary Gym And The Promise Of Self Transformation* (New York: Meyer and Meyer Sport, 2004), 47, 50.

¹⁸² Cahn, *Coming On Strong*, 268.

Christian athletes are able to undermine concerns regarding female athletic sexuality and understand excelling at sport as part of God's plan.

The discipleship text *Experiencing God's Power for Female Athletes* addresses these two dimensions of female athletic experience directly. The authors, three female sports ministers, focus on the struggle to balance femininity and athleticism and ways to avoid "emotional dependency," a code phrase for homosexuality.¹⁸³ The authors tell female Christians athletes that God intended their gender to be female and that embracing femininity is an important part of fulfilling God's goals for the female athlete. They quote Karen Drollinger:

Femininity may not help a female athlete shoot free throws better, but accepting and fulfilling one's godly image gives her inner confidence to perform to the best of her ability. In other words, femininity is a necessity if women athletes are to be all that God created them to be.¹⁸⁴

Drollinger defines femininity as an inner confidence in one's gender and an ability to demonstrate that to others. Drollinger's statement is confusing because she begins by stating that femininity is unlikely to improve athletic performance—it won't help you at the free throw line. Yet she follows this by arguing that embracing femininity is essential for maximizing athletic potential—so it might help with free throws after all. This sort of double speak is common throughout the text as the authors try to find a way to value femininity and athleticism at the same time.

¹⁸³ Deb Hoffman, Julie Caldwell, and Kathy Schultz, *Experiencing God's Power for Female Athletes: How to Compete, Knowing and Doing the Will of God* (Grand Island, Nebr.: Cross Training Publishing, 1999).

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 76.

Interestingly, the authors present God as beyond gender. They say that masculine pronouns are used as generic references and that the Bible attributes masculine and feminine qualities to God.¹⁸⁵ The authors are working out a difficult negotiation. They want to emphasize that “one gender is not superior to the other,”¹⁸⁶ but at the same time they want to preserve gender differences. For example, the authors invoke essentialism and socialization at the same time without discerning between traits that are innate versus traits that are developed:

There are many differences that may not be biological in nature, but are still characteristic of men and women. Women are often more social and demonstrate a stronger need for relationships. Men are often quite task-driven and may not express as great a need for emotional closeness as women. Some of these differences may be a result of socialization, or conditioning. It used to be thought that certain activities were best left to men, such as sports. Women were better equipped (or so it was thought) to be in the kitchen. Times have changed! Obviously, there are some differences that do not change because they are inherent...¹⁸⁷

This excerpt demonstrates that the authors are uncomfortable with gender hierarchy when it comes to sports, clearly stating that women belong on the playing field as much as they previously belonged in the kitchen. However, the authors are also uncomfortable with complete gender equality, naturalizing gender differences to argue that men and women complement each other.

Readers are told that men and women are equally capable of Christ-likeness. The authors retell God’s creation of humans in Genesis, emphasizing the creation of humankind rather than Eve’s role in the fall from Eden:

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 48.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 55.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 52.

Genesis 1:27 states, “*God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.*” In the first part of the verse, “God created man in his [God’s] own image,” the word for man is *adam*, meaning humankind. This refers to all people. The expression “image of God” (*imago Dei*) refers to how God is reflected, or seen, in people. Males and females both reflect the image of God.¹⁸⁸

While this presentation of Genesis makes men and women equal in the eyes of God, the authors are clear that this does not mean that men and women are the same: “God knew what gender you were going to be, and He is pleased that you are female! You are special because you were created female.”¹⁸⁹ The authors then present women as having “a combination of masculine and feminine traits, but women have more emphasis on the feminine ones... [such as] soft, yielded, responsive, nurturing, and receptive.”¹⁹⁰ They quote Jeanette Howard, author of *Out of Egypt: Leaving Lesbianism Behind*, who defines femininity as, “the essence of what God intends women to think, feel, and act.”¹⁹¹ According to *Experiencing God’s Power for Female Athletes*, God’s intentions for women are to complement men by embracing their own feminine qualities, especially in the realm of sport where the authors see an increased pressure to behave in masculine ways.

In particular, the authors point to two ways that sport compromises femininity. The first is in appearance and comportment. The authors argue that female athletes dress

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 45 (emphasis in original).

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 51.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 54.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 55. See Jeanette Howard, *Out of Egypt: Leaving Lesbianism Behind* (Baltimore, Md.: Regeneration Books, 1991).

and behave in ways that diminish their femininity. They warn against hiding femininity behind athletic clothing:

It is possible that if sweatshirts and gym shorts are what you wear the majority of the time, it may be more of a reflection about what you believe about yourself or how you want others to perceive you... How do you feel when you wear dresses or clothing that is clearly feminine? Do you feel confident or uncomfortable?¹⁹²

The authors emphasize that feminine appearance is important to an internal confidence in one's gender, but at the same time, they caution against eating disorders and succumbing to cultural values of feminine beauty. "Magazine and television advertisements portray primarily thin, beautiful, smiling models... the problem is, this unrealistic message can lead to girls and young women believing that their happiness and popularity depend on achieving a certain dress size or weight."¹⁹³ Like Drollinger's earlier contradiction, this negotiation between feminine appearance and bodily anxiety demonstrates an ambivalence in valuing femininity and valuing athletics. Readers are told, "[God] values you as a person, and part of who you are is your 'female-ness.' God values you as female!"¹⁹⁴ In connecting "female-ness" to feminine clothing, the authors are equating feminine appearance with value to God. They write:

Develop feminine qualities and characteristics in yourself that will show others that you are confident as a female both on and off the court. Examine the areas in your life to see what message you are sending to others in your dress, language (gossip, using profanity), relationships, etc.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹² Ibid., 77.

¹⁹³ Ibid., 60.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 67.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 78.

The female athlete is expected to demonstrate her femininity to others through clothes and behaviors, yet she is meant to avoid anxiety stemming from an imperfect feminine body image.

The second danger the authors highlight as compromising femininity is relationships that rely on “emotional dependency.” Although the authors state that emotional dependency can develop in all kinds of relationships, it seems that they are primarily talking about homosexual relationships. The authors’ tendency to quote ex-lesbians as experts reveals an impulse to naturalize heterosexuality as the correct expression of femininity. They include a fictional narrative about Jill and Becky, two college athletes who spend increasing amounts of time together, laugh at inside jokes that only the two of them share, and make others uncomfortable by “hugging each other for long periods of time. It wasn’t long before rumors started on the team that Jill and Becky were in a lesbian relationship.”¹⁹⁶ The authors warn, “What happened in Jill and Becky’s relationship is not that uncommon. What started out as a positive friendship turned into an emotionally dependent relationship, ... [crossing] physical boundaries and [leading] into a homosexual relationship.”¹⁹⁷ Many evangelical Christians see homosexuality indicating a lack of religious commitment or a misunderstanding of God’s intentions for humans. According to Leonard LeSourd, a Christian author of a number of books on Christianity and gender,

Christian homosexuals have two positive avenues to pursue. First, they can seek a complete inner healing and change of lifestyle from homo- to heterosexual orientation. Or, second, they can follow a path of lifelong celibacy. Any gay man

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 133.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

[or woman] who makes an all-out commitment to Jesus will be given the grace and strength and persistence to adhere successfully to one of these two routes.¹⁹⁸

LeSourd's understanding is indicative of the dominant approach to homosexuality within the sports ministry community; homosexuality is treated as a condition that one can change or suppress through Christian commitment.

The language of "emotional dependency" is used by some Christians to diagnose and dismiss queer relationships.¹⁹⁹ Christian athletic resources often recommend that athletes concerned with emotional dependency consult the resources provided by Exodus, a ministry dedicated to "freedom from homosexuality through Jesus Christ."²⁰⁰ Exodus relies on culturally established ideas of masculinity and femininity to connect wayward Christians with their gender obligations. For example, they recommend a friendly football game to connect men to masculinity and a make-over party to connect women to femininity. Since "sports are just a natural way for guys to connect" and since women struggling with lesbianism "will stay away from skirts, makeup, and jewelry," these tactics teach the participants that they are not different from average men and women and should embrace their gender roles. According to their website, "It's not really about the points at the end of the game or the style of a person's hair; the goal is to change our

¹⁹⁸ Leonard E. LeSourd, *Strong Men, Weak Men: Godly Strength and the Male Identity* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Chosen Books, 1990), 50.

¹⁹⁹ Pat Griffin, *Strong Women, Deep Closets: Lesbians and Homophobia in Sport* (Champaign, Ill.: Human Kinetics, 1998). See especially, Chapter 7.

²⁰⁰ Exodus International Homepage, <http://www.exodus-international.org> (accessed 12 April 2008).

distorted perceptions of ourselves and heal inner wounds.”²⁰¹ This presents homosexuality as a disease in need of healing, an understanding that is prevalent in literature for female Christian athletes. *Sharing the Victory* includes multiple articles chronicling women’s “escape” from homosexual relationships. One ex-lesbian writes, “Since the major root of lesbianism is broken relationships with parents and peers of the same sex, we as Christians have a responsibility to step out of our comfort zones and to establish healthy friendships with those involved in homosexual lifestyles.”²⁰² The author credits one such friendship with changing her life and allowing her to “have a great husband and two wonderful daughters.”²⁰³ Stories like this use phrases like “emotional dependency” to infer that homosexuality is a result of a depraved state that can be remedied through Christian teachings.

Evangelical understandings of homosexuality as deviant and dangerous are paralleled by presentations of homosexuality in sport as a whole. As Susan Cahn points out, accusations of homosexuality can be devastating to a female athlete’s career:

[Female athletes] at all levels of sport experience the tension between femininity and athleticism—the suspicion that athletic ability and interest signals lesbianism.... Oddly, concerns about lesbianism in sport may even have increased, in inverse relationship to the greater acceptance of women’s sport in general.... The growing popularity of women’s sport hinges on the athlete’s success in reassuring the public that, however exceptional her athletic talents, she is in all respects a “normal” woman.²⁰⁴

²⁰¹ “What ‘Cures’ Homosexuality?”, Exodus International, <http://exodus.to/content/view/505/186/> (accessed 12 April 2008).

²⁰² Susie Magill and Yvette Schneider, “Out of the Alternative,” *Sharing the Victory*, <http://www.sharingthevictory.com/vsItemDisplay.lsp?method=display&objectid=D3ADE24F-3516-4869-B8BB698F54235125> (accessed 8 October 2008).

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Cahn, *Coming On Strong*, 265.

Merely the inference of lesbianism is enough to bench, ostracize, or drop a player from a team. Rumors circulate about lists of lesbian coaches provided to parents of recruits and spies posted at lesbian bars to out closeted coaches and players. Universities use negative recruiting to scare potential recruits and their parents, assuring them that there are no lesbians on their team but there certainly are on a rival team.²⁰⁵ These practices have forced both straight and queer female athletes to emphasize and over-emphasize heterosexual identity and traditional femininity.²⁰⁶

Because elite female athletes are transgressing in the male realm of sport, there is a widely held cultural assumption that they are sexually deviant. Yvette Schneider, a Christian who has produced multiple resources on “emotional dependency,” writes in *Sharing the Victory*, “Lesbianism in women’s sports is nothing new. Teammates are so close to each other—practicing together, traveling together. Women who may not have a lesbian core attraction are now being more influenced by lesbianism.”²⁰⁷ In addition to

²⁰⁵ Pat Griffin, “Changing the Game: Homophobia, Sexism and Lesbians in Sport,” in *Gender and Sport: A Reader*, ed. Sheila Scraton and Anne Flintoff (New York: Routledge, 2002), 193-208.

²⁰⁶ This is significant in the sport of female bodybuilding. See Leslie Heywood’s account of female bodybuilders’ self-manipulation, including breast implants, dyed hair, high-heeled shoes, and over-emphasized make-up. Leslie Heywood, *Bodymakers: A Cultural Anatomy of Women’s Body Building* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1998). Further, intensified femininity has the effect of closeting lesbian athletes. As queer writer and activist Victoria Brownworth notes, “The closet is the most important tool in the reinforcing of homophobia in our society, and that homophobia is cyclical in nature: the deeper one is closeted, the more fearful one is of being outed; the more power outing has, the safer the closet seems.” *Too Queer: Essays from a Radical Life* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Firebrand Books, 1996), 73.

²⁰⁷ Yvette Schneider, “Out of the Alternative Schneider Q&A,” *Sharing the Victory*, <http://www.sharingthevictory.com/vsItemDisplay.lsp&objectID=580DD448-24BA-45D2-916768D3E1EA5DB0&method=display> (accessed 8 October 2008).

the dangers of too much time in the locker room, Schneider points to increased attention to sex in society generally. Her advice to Christian female athletes who may be tempted by lesbianism is to learn the difference between “normal interdependency that happens in a wholesome relationship and the emotional dependency that develops in an unhealthy relationship.”²⁰⁸ The phrase “emotional dependency” carries connotations of weakness, a detrimental trait for athletes. By presenting lesbianism as something that women fall prey to rather than thoughtfully engage in, Christian authors diminish the agency of female athletes generally. Indeed, there is a tendency for Christian ex-lesbians to attribute their own homosexual relationships to tactics of the devil. For example, Alexandria Hagler writes, “I believed that no man would ever satisfy me. I thought, ‘I’m not going to find what I’m looking for, the love I want, in another man.’ Because I carried this sentiment, I held a big target for the enemy.”²⁰⁹ This presentation of homosexuality makes the devil the actor in the relationship and the lesbian the victim in need of a savior. Viewing homosexuality in this manner reinforces the idea that lesbianism is a condition that can be treated by commitment to Christianity.

Sports ministry, and evangelical Christianity generally, adheres to a gender logic that emphasizes inherent differences between men and women. Female athletes, though growing in prominence generally, are potentially subject to accusations of mannishness or lesbianism that could destroy their careers. Membership in sports ministry organizations and internalization of evangelicalism’s conservative gender paradigm is

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Alexandria Hagler and Janet Goreham, “Restored,” *Sharing the Victory*, <http://www.sharingthevictory.com/vsItemDisplay.lsp&objectID=EA1ABF3B-607D-4522-A1046B24214D9701&method=display> (accessed 8 October 2008).

one method of offsetting these accusations by reifying a gender identity based on traditional femininity. In their analysis of images of female athletes that circulate culturally, Leslie Heywood and Shari Dworkin note “feminine markers are often drawn upon to help mediate historical tensions between femininity and sport.”²¹⁰ This assessment arises specifically in their analysis of a Nike ad featuring a girl removing her hockey helmet. Amidst the masculinizing helmet and hockey pads, there is a small Nike swoosh with the words “I like pink.”²¹¹ Sports ministry for women can function like the “I like pink” in this Nike ad, reaffirming traditional gender roles and trivializing gender transgression by promoting a conservative gender paradigm.

Clearly, Title IX and the growth of women in sport has greatly affected sports ministry. In developing materials aimed at a growing population of female athletes, sports ministry organizations have provided tools for balancing femininity and athleticism and present this balance as God’s intention for female athletes. As noted, these resources promote femininity based on appearance and heterosexuality. Since evangelical women are told that submission to their husbands is God’s intention, they are expected to balance a feminine ideal of submission with the athletic skills that make them successful on the playing field. By promoting this balance, sports ministry can function to relieve anxiety by allowing female Christian athletes to hold athletic and feminine identities simultaneously. However, as I have shown, this has detrimental effects on representations of and reactions to homosexuality. Lesbianism is portrayed as an outcome of abuse that can be healed by Jesus’ love, and access to this healing is

²¹⁰ Heywood and Dworkin, *Built to Win*, 145.

²¹¹ Pictured in Heywood and Dworkin, *Built to Win*, 144. Nike ad, *Sports Illustrated for Women*, April 2001.

understood to begin with evangelism. According to Yvette Schneider, “Women involved in lesbianism are not different from the next person concerning their need for God. Maybe their childhood experiences have been more painful as a result of rejection or abuse.”²¹² While the first part of this statement democratizes and equalizes the need for Christianity, the second part reinforces the idea that lesbians are damaged and in need of healing. This leads to condescension toward lesbians by the sports ministry community and a tendency to dismiss homosexual relationships as “emotional dependency,” depicting those involved as overly weak and vulnerable.

As the first half of this dissertation has shown, sports ministry began with a sales pitch for Jesus, using male sporting celebrities to reach large audiences. As criticism and dissatisfaction with this approach grew, the movement shifted toward the elevation of individual religious experience. For women, especially those unlikely to achieve celebrity fame, this opened the door for increased participation in sports ministry. In recent decades, sports ministry has focused on the lives and experiences of female athletes, now the largest demographic in sports ministry organizations. In order to investigate the lived experiences of these athletes, I turn to a series of field sites that represent a range of participation. In the next chapter, I explore an FCA summer camp for high school athletes where I worked closely with a group of high school volleyball players. In the subsequent chapters, I describe Christian sports teams composed of college and post-college female athletes—AIA’s traveling basketball team and the Charlotte Lady Eagles, a Christian soccer team located in Charlotte, North Carolina. These field sites represent a significant cross section of contemporary sports ministry in

²¹² Schneider, “Out of the Alternative Schneider Q&A.”

America. I traveled to different regions of the country—FCA camp in the northwest, AIA games in the northeast, and the Lady Eagles in the south. I examined the activities that the largest sports ministry organizations are most famous for—FCA is the number one Christian sports camp provider and AIA made a name for itself with a traveling men’s basketball team in the 1960s. Recognizing that sport specific ministry organizations have been growing in number since the 1970s, I turn to the Lady Eagles as an example of this phenomenon. The team is one of several owned by Ministry Athletes International, a sports ministry organization that focuses solely on soccer. As such, these three field sites constitute illuminating investigative spaces that reveal the effects of sports ministry in the lives of contemporary participants.

CHAPTER 5

“Game Ready”: Spiritual Warfare and the FCA Camp Experience

On the third night of camp, the speaker held a Bible over his head, saying, “This is a guide so you’ll never be destroyed!” The Bible’s bright orange and blue cover could clearly be seen from the audience. It read “God’s Game Plan.”

Glancing down the row, I saw teenagers at rapt attention, some gazing down at their own copy of *God’s Game Plan*, standard issue to each camper at check-in to this 5-day Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) summer camp. The speaker, with Bible held high, continued, “God’s rules are in place so you will not be destroyed! Jesus never came to judge you. He came to set you straight. Are you prepared to meet Jesus today?”²¹³

The energy in the room was palpable. The high school athletes surrounding me had spent the previous two days discussing athletics and American youth culture as battlegrounds between God and Satan. They were told that they were born into a war between unseen forces and that this war was fought in their own minds and bodies. In order to “not be destroyed,” these teenagers were told that they must accept Jesus into their hearts, be vigilant against the ways of Satan, and follow the rules set forth in *God’s Game Plan*.

The hundred or so high school athletes that gathered at the 2007 FCA camp in Forest Grove, Oregon came from different sports, different denominations, and different schools (public and private) from across the northwest region. Despite these differences,

²¹³ Fieldnotes by author, 20 July 2007, Forest Grove, Ore.

these athletes shared a common passion for sports and a common desire to integrate sport and Christianity. Christian Smith, a scholar of evangelicalism in the United States, has described an evangelical worldview as being *in*, but not *of*, the world.²¹⁴ For the Christian athletes at FCA camp, this was understood as an injunction to be *in*, but not *of*, the sporting world. Engaging the sporting world was framed as a dangerous enterprise, with both God and Satan focused on athletic bodies as battlegrounds. This elevates the importance of athletic engagement to a near apocalyptic level and affirms for believers that religion belongs in their athletic lives. In this chapter, I focus on spiritual warfare as an important component of evangelical athletic identity. I explain how spiritual warfare is invoked at FCA camp and contextualize this in the larger context of post-9/11 approaches to global conflict. Ultimately, I use the structure and events of camp to show how athletic embodied experience can reinforce evangelical stances on conflict, both political and spiritual.

Before launching into a discussion of spiritual warfare, it may be helpful to explore how FCA summer camps came to be vehicles for theological training. Since its first summer conference in 1956, FCA has been recognized as the foremost Christian sports camp provider. Before summer sports training camps became a common American youth experience, FCA held sports conferences for high school, college, and

²¹⁴ Smith argues that American evangelicalism has continued to thrive because, as a subculture, it has developed two complementary features: a moral orientation that provides meaning and belonging and clear distinction coupled with significant engagement with other outgroups. Christian Smith, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 118-119.

professional athletes and was one of the first sports ministry organizations to actively combine biblical and athletic training.²¹⁵

As the sporting world changed, so did FCA camps. In 1974, shortly after the passage of Title IX, FCA began offering camps for girls at their national conference center. Female participation continued to grow, and by 1987 nearly half of all the camp attendees were women.²¹⁶ By the early 1980s, athletes began to specialize in one particular sport early in their athletic careers, and in 1989 FCA began offering sport specific camps in addition to general athletic training.²¹⁷ As sporting culture became accessible to younger and younger athletes through organized sports for all ages, FCA included camps for elementary and middle-school age children, instituting a day camp called Power Camp in 2003. In 2007 FCA hosted seven different kinds of camps—Power Camps, sport-specific camps, leadership camps, coaches’ camps, team camps, international camps, and partnership camps (partnering between FCA and an existing training camp). All together, these camps hosted over 40,000 attendees in 2007, nearly 10,000 more than in 2006, and double the attendance of 2003.²¹⁸

One reason that FCA was able to expand so well in the early 2000s was due to a change in the power structure of the camp branch of the organization. Before 2002, all

²¹⁵ While biblical and physical education were aims of the early YMCA, these trainings rarely occurred simultaneously. See Clifford Putney, *Muscular Christianity: Manhood and Sports in Protestant America, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001).

²¹⁶ Wayne Atcheson, *Impact for Christ: How FCA Has Influenced the Sports World* (Grand Island, Nebr.: Cross Training Publishing, 1994), 110.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 23.

²¹⁸ “2007 Camp Ministry Report,” Fellowship of Christian Athletes, Kansas City, Mo.

camps were approved and maintained by the FCA home office—including location, format, and budget. However, after 2002, FCA pushed these decisions to local field staff, granting local staff power over camp design and absolving the larger organization from overseeing camp budgets. FCA continued to provide a curriculum guide to be used at all camps. The organization’s new models expanded FCA’s presence in the sports camp industry. Power Camps for younger athletes created a feeder program that encouraged loyalty to FCA camps throughout an athletic career. Partnership camps provided FCA programming materials to existing sports camps, making the curriculum itself a saleable commodity. These proved highly effective as FCA has more than tripled its camp attendance since 2002.

FCA launches a new theme each summer. The 2007-2008 theme was “Game Ready,” and corresponded to a key Bible verse, Ephesians 6:11, which reads, “Put on the full armor of God so that you can stand against the tactics of the Devil.”²¹⁹ The theme and verse appear on the cover of camp Bibles, camp notebooks, nametags, and purchasable merchandise like t-shirts and athletic wear. FCA’s use of a theme and corresponding verse is a long-standing camp tradition that has been present for over 50 years. However, in addition to this practice, 2007 saw the beginning of new camp programming strategies. Each day, with the exception of the final half day, was given a title representing a daily theme—Day 1: Game Ready, Day 2: Gear Up, Day 3: Get Up, and Day 4: Step Up. These themes were coupled with verses surrounding Ephesians

²¹⁹ Eph. 6:11 HCSB

6:11, so that the camp curriculum as a whole covered a longer Bible passage, Ephesians 6:10-20.²²⁰

Though this is a long passage, it may be worth including it here in order to explore the key themes that framed the 2007 camp experience:

Finally, be strengthened by the Lord and by His vast strength. Put on the full armor of God so that you can stand against the tactics of the Devil. For our battle is not against the flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavens. This is why you must take up the full armor of God, so that you may be able to resist in the evil day, and having prepared everything, to take your stand. Stand, therefore, with truth like a belt around your waist, righteousness like armor on your chest, and your feet sandaled with readiness for the gospel of peace. In every situation take the shield of faith, and with it you will be able to extinguish the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is God's word. With every prayer and request, pray at all times in the Spirit, and stay alert in this, with all perseverance and intercession for all the saints. Pray also for me, that the message may be given to me when I open my mouth to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel. For this I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I might be bold enough in Him to speak as I should.

This passage instructs the Christian to be vigilant against forces of evil and to employ military trappings in this battle. Though the verse is clear that the battle is not *against* the flesh and blood, campers were taught that their bodies form the *ground* for this battle. God and Satan were presented as warring entities using the athletes' bodies to fight an epic battle between good and evil.

From the first day of camp, campers were immersed in the language of war and battle. Roused at 7:00 a.m. for their private morning quiet time, campers read a devotional in *God's Game Plan* that compared pre-game preparation to God's preparation of Christians to resist "the trials and temptations of this world." According to

²²⁰ Eph. 6: 10-20 HCSB

the text, “Your coach will see to it that you are ready to take the field in sports, but who will equip you for life? Are you ready for the daily battles? Follow God and the instruction of His Word and be ready like the men and women of old. Your worldly opponent is a crafty one, so get equipped for battle. Game on!”²²¹ Battle was an ever-present interpretive lens at FCA camp. On the second morning, a camp speaker emphasized urgency and importance, saying:

Not if, it *is* coming. The enemy will attack. We’re here to play sports, but sport is also the ground of spiritual warfare. The enemy works in three ways to attack you through sport: to make you behave in an un-Christian way, to exploit your weaknesses and flaws through self-doubt, and to distract your focus as an athlete. You will see it this week. The enemy will attack. But, I want you to know that you can have great joy, because we have the ultimate weapon against the enemy [holds up Bible]: the Truth will help you fight.²²²

The “attack” on Christian athletes is an embodied one. Physical sensations like exhaustion are presented as weapons in a war fought on the terrain of their bodies. Campers saw themselves as fighting against self-doubt and distraction, narrated as weapons of the Devil, and were encouraged to see the opposite sensations, confidence and concentration, as gifts from God.

Very early in the camp experience, campers were expected to recognize and elaborate on conflict as a central component of evangelical identity. Using materials included in *God’s Game Plan*, campers and huddle leaders discussed the specifics of understanding sport as spiritual warfare. For example, one bible study question reads, “In order to be victorious, we need to have a victory over something or someone. What is the

²²¹ Jere Johnson, “Game Ready,” *God’s Game Plan*, 1362.

²²² Fieldnotes by author, 19 July 2007, Forest Grove, Ore.

battle we are in? Who or what is your opponent?”²²³ Campers were encouraged to list “battles” with the world, within themselves, and with Satan. In the huddle I observed, campers named things like self-doubt, physical insecurity, pride, and over-investment in social standards. Campers were taught that doubt, especially doubt about their physical abilities, comes from Satan. “One of the greatest victories the enemy can have is creating unbelief. If we never recognize that Satan exists, then we will think that we don’t have an opponent, and then we won’t think that we are in a competition. At that point, he has won.”²²⁴ Doubting the existence of the enemy becomes a tactic of the enemy, successfully eliminating any outside to the battle. Everything is engulfed under the umbrella of spiritual warfare. Elizabeth Castelli writes, “[T]he rhetoric of ‘the war on Christians’ operates outside of the empirical field, creating a self-referential and self-generating logic that begins from the premise that Christians are by definition perennially locked in battle with ‘the enemy’ in a cosmic war without end.”²²⁵

The sense of menacing external threats may constitute the farthest extreme of evangelical ideas on conflict and may be embraced by a minority of adherents,²²⁶ but spiritual warfare was consistently invoked at FCA camp in multiple environments including worship, practice, and small groups. Becca, the leader of the volleyball huddle, told her small group:

²²³ “FCA’s Game Plan,” *God’s Game Plan*, 1350.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, 1351.

²²⁵ Elizabeth A. Castelli, “Persecution Complexes: Identity Politics and the ‘War on Christians,’” *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 18 (2007): 165.

²²⁶ Smith, *American Evangelicalism*, 142-143.

Sport goes away. Spiritual warfare is real. The enemy is waiting for you to pull you down into the darkness. You have to be on fire for Christ, to be a light that others can run to. Other people will use the enemy's strength to fight against you; you have to keep your eyes open and use your strong faith to keep clear about who your enemy is.²²⁷

This overt emphasis on recognizing the tactics of the Devil and fighting against them through faith was connected to sporting experience in two ways—metaphorically, athletic language was used to convey this information, and physically, athletes were meant to understand that their bodily experiences (soreness, exhaustion) are part of spiritual warfare.

Because there is a larger cultural usage of military metaphors in sports descriptions, it is easy to move between Christianity and sports via the language of war. Spiritual warfare, as the overarching camp theme, encompassed sporting competition as well as social problems and individual struggles. These were key issues in creating the camp curriculum. According to one curriculum developer:

Look at our youth. A lot of them are depressed, they're hopeless, they have no vision for their life, and they don't understand why. They come from broken homes, they don't understand why. They have trouble at school, they don't know why. It's because there is this battle going on. So, you kind of tiptoe around it or you can call it what it is. Satan is out to get you and ruin your life. It's kind of a call to arms. I mean, tap into that competitive mindset—someone's pushing you. How are you going to respond? It's like, "I'm not going to be bullied."²²⁸

Recognizing that athletes are already familiar with competition and struggle allowed FCA to emphasize this dimension of evangelical identity, foregrounding conflict as central to athletic and Christian success.

An FCA higher-up summarized the 2007 camp theme as such:

²²⁷ Fieldnotes by author, 19 July 2007, Forest Grove, Ore.

²²⁸ Interview by author, tape recording, 10 October 2007, Kansas City, Mo.

So really, the whole “Game Ready” is, we want the image that, after everything we’ve done, the kids go back—all the videos, the testimonies, the bible studies, the devotions—they go back and they say, one, I’m in a battle. I’m in the game. And, I have a choice to determine what team I want to be on. And, also I have an opportunity everyday to be victorious or not. You know, and, it’s going to be a struggle. It’s going to be a battle. And, you just don’t walk into games haphazardly and just think it’s going to be, you know, malaise and whatever. But, instead, we want you to be ready. We want you to be focused, be prepared for that game that’s before them. We feel that, as a ministry, our responsibility this summer was to equip them with the understanding that they are approaching a game. You know, and, it could be a life and death situation. Physically or spiritually.²²⁹

In this description, the element of conflict is apparent—the campers are meant to learn that they are embroiled in spiritual warfare. FCA camp is constructed to convey a spiritual urgency through the language of war and violence. Conflict is part of sports and part of what it means to be an evangelical Christian, and, as I will show, it is also an integral part of contemporary political rhetoric in the United States.²³⁰ In this way, political actions, sporting events, and the logic of evangelical embattlement reinforce each other and produce a layered experience of conflict and persecution for the Christian athlete.

Curriculum developers for FCA camp were attuned to war as a theme not only in sport, but in the contemporary world:

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ My thinking on this is informed by the works of Giorgio Agamben on modern politics. Agamben argues that contemporary society can be understood as in a constant “state of exception” that elevates urgency and grants undue power to sovereign persons and institutions. He argues that modern politics “cannot be grasped if it is not understood as necessarily implying the difference between the two terms: the *police* now becomes *politics*, and the care of life coincides with the fight against the enemy.” Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazan (Stanford University Press: Stanford, Calif.: 1998), 147. Agamben explores this idea at length in a subsequent text, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2005).

Curriculum Developer 1: I think there's several layers to that. I mean, one is, I can remember my coach saying, in looking at the entire season, each game is a battle, but the season is the war. Like, "We lost the battle. We didn't lose the war." I mean, war is such a relevant issue across the world right now. I don't think that was directly tied in, but it kind of—

Curriculum Developer 2: It was happening.

Curriculum Developer 1: It wasn't some obscure reference that nobody would understand.²³¹

Indeed, war was a reference that resonated with American political involvement on the global stage in the 2000s. Following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the Bush administration launched a series of military endeavors meant to quell terrorism and protect the American way of life. President George W. Bush continually presented military action as a dualistic battle between good and evil, us and them. Religious studies scholar Melissa Conroy analyzes this rhetoric in her essay on American militarism, "Army of One?"

Bush has said, "There is no neutral ground—no neutral ground—in the fight between civilization and terror, because there is no neutral ground between good and evil, freedom and slavery, and life and death." This epic battle, so clearly delineated, stresses the absolute nature of differences between the two forces. It serves to create a harmonious idea of "America" by excluding a scapegoat, whose form is any force thought to threaten the beatific ideal image of America...²³²

As Conroy notes, the simplistic dualistic presentation of "us" against "them" serves to elevate an ideal image of the United States and presents any threat to this ideal as an act of evil.

²³¹ Interview by author, tape recording, 10 October 2007, Kansas City, Mo.

²³² Melissa Conroy, "An Army of One? Subject, Signifier, and the Symbolic" in *The Sleeping Giant Has Awoken: The New Politics of Religion in the United States*, ed. Jeffrey W. Robbins and Neal Magee (Continuum Books: New York, 2008), 184.

This idealization of America has had dramatic effects in terms of military action. Political economist David Harvey argues that Bush's presentation of the enemy has allowed the Bush administration to invent and justify "pre-emptive strikes" on groups and countries construed as threats to freedom.

Through the formulation of the doctrine of "pre-emptive strike" against foreign nations in the midst of a supposedly all-threatening global war on terror, the US public can imagine that it is struggling benevolently to bring freedom and democracy everywhere (particularly in Iraq) while playing out its darkest fears regarding some unknown and hidden enemy that is threatening its very existence.²³³

Harvey argues that this formulation is a "catastrophic and... suicidal calculation" that functions by associating the war on terror with the apocalypse.²³⁴ Religious studies scholar Clayton Crockett agrees, noting, "the conflation of war and violence with biblical revelations and predictions of the Apocalypse and the second coming of Christ suggest that something is deeply wrong at the heart of the American Empire."²³⁵

Amidst the growing recognition that the war on terror and evangelical Christianity seem to reinforce each other's ideals, FCA camp focused on spiritual warfare as an athletic experience. For example, the speaker on the night of day two reinforced ideas of spiritual warfare during athletic engagement: "It's hard to stay fired up. You have to stay connected; to your coach, to God, to the game, to life. Life is bigger than sport, it is

²³³ David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2005), 196-197.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, 197.

²³⁵ Clayton Crockett, "Jeb Stuart's Revenge: The Civil War, the Religious Right, and American Fascism" in *The Sleeping Giant Has Awoken*, 93.

a fight against the Devil.”²³⁶ According to the speaker, athletes should look for four signs of disconnectedness: a superior attitude, boredom or distraction, selfishness, and irritability. Later, small groups called “huddles” addressed these ideas personally: “Did you feel disconnected or discouraged during practice today? What can you do tomorrow to prevent the enemy from interfering with practice?” One camper responded, “I can feel the enemy in my head when I’m sore or tired. It’s a big accomplishment to play through the soreness.”²³⁷ For Christian athletes, spiritual warfare is an embodied experience.

By the conclusion of camp, after five days of lessons and practices, campers had spent nearly every waking hour practicing the conflation of spiritual warfare and sports.²³⁸ FCA camp employed an evangelical approach to spiritual warfare that emphasized a multi-faceted and omni-present battle, and because spiritual warfare occurs everywhere, all the time, campers were warned to be constantly vigilant. Again, this representation of threat as omni-present is increasingly common in Western political rhetoric. Political theorist Giorgio Agamben has noted that modern political states rely on a “state of exception” to justify sovereign decision-making. He argues that after World War II the “state of exception” has become normative, and contemporary citizens

²³⁶ Fieldnotes by author, 19 July 2007, Forest Grove, Ore.

²³⁷ Fieldnotes by author, 19 July 2007, Forest Grove, Ore.

²³⁸ This closed-system approach to conflict resonates with late-capitalist presentations of political persecution. Connolly’s investigation of the dispositional affinities between evangelical Christianity and the U.S. political right wing points to persecution as a primary point of resonance. “The element of identity most significant to this movement, I suggest, is the insistence by its members that they are being persecuted *unless* they are thoroughly in power, and the compensatory sense of special entitlement that accompanies the rise to power of a constituency that so construes itself.” Connolly, “The Evangelical-Capitalist Resonance Machine,” 873 (emphasis in original).

are consistently subject to language of threat and danger, a rhetoric that serves to concentrate power in the hands of sovereign persons and institutions. He writes:

President Bush's decision to refer to himself constantly as the "Commander in Chief of the Army" after September 11, 2001, must be considered in the context of this presidential claim to sovereign powers in emergency situations. If, as we have seen, the assumption of this title entails a direct reference to the state of exception, then Bush is attempting to produce a situation in which the emergency becomes the rule, and the very distinction between peace and war (and between foreign and civil war) becomes impossible.²³⁹

Agamben's analysis of Bush's post-9/11 actions emphasizes that American citizens have come to expect the "state of exception" as the rule. During the years that I worked on this dissertation, I flew to many different locations in the US, and the airport threat advisory never dropped below orange, the second highest level of threat. In light of Agamben's analysis, this indicates that Americans have accepted and continue to function under the pretense that we are in a state of exception, when in fact the exception has become the rule.

If we accept the premise that threat is not exceptional but normative, we can better understand the lessons of FCA camp. For example, the camp curriculum dedicated a day's worth of study to the following verses:

This is why you must take up the full armor of God, so that you may be able to resist in the evil day, and having prepared everything, take your stand. Stand, therefore, with truth like a belt around your waist, righteousness like the armor on your chest, and your feet sandaled with readiness for the gospel of peace. In every situation take the shield of faith, and with it you will be able to extinguish the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is God's word.²⁴⁰

²³⁹ Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2005), 22.

²⁴⁰ Eph. 6: 13-17 HCSB

This passage was broken down into distinct elements and analyzed; each part of the armor held a specific meaning that campers were meant to understand as integral to their participation in spiritual warfare. For example, the sandals are connected to the “gospel of peace.” This was taken as a directive to share the gospel with others, the sandals representing a reminder that you have to go to others, not expect them to come to you. Additionally, the “peace” attached to the gospel was interpreted as a proper sense of balance and a readiness for battle.²⁴¹ This interpretation shows that even words like “peace” are contextualized within spiritual warfare. A second part of the armor that bears mention here is the “sword of the Spirit,” interpreted as the Bible. In this presentation, the Bible is understood as an aggressive tool to be used not only to defeat Satan but also to evangelize to others. As one camp speaker put it, “Imagine this [camp] is a locker room. It’s scary out there. The enemy works to marginalize Jesus Christ. Turn to your teammate right now and say, ‘I’m prepared.’ Your opponent is ready to rumble, but he can’t match up to the Word of God.”²⁴² In this statement, the Bible is a weapon. The speaker called on the campers to be witnesses on their teams, to not be distracted by the devil, and to pray that they will be bold enough to share the gospel.²⁴³

Over the course of five days together, campers were taught to understand athletics as the ground of spiritual warfare. They not only listened to speakers and discussed these ideas in their huddles, but they enacted their understandings of spiritual warfare with their

²⁴¹ Fieldnotes by author, 21 July 2007, Forest Grove, Ore.

²⁴² Ibid.

²⁴³ Ibid.

own bodies. This was evident in the two culmination points of the camp experience: the altar call and “Gut Check.” The altar call is an invitation to publicly declare a commitment to Christianity and occurs in the auditorium. Gut Check is a 25-minute physical challenge that forces campers to push themselves to their physical limits after days of rigorous athletic training, and it occurs in the gym. At first glance, these two culmination points seem to indicate two separate elements of camp—a spiritual conversion or recommitment and a physical victory. However, both are examples of combining religious and physical experiences, and both rely on the logic of spiritual warfare.

On the third night of camp, an obese man in a baseball jersey took the stage to conduct the altar call. He began with comical stories about his family, leading to a lesson that God, like a father, provides rules to protect his children. According to the speaker, these rules exist not because God is mean or unfair, but because God has a strong desire to help you live in the best possible way. When the speaker held up the Bible and proclaimed it “a guide so you’ll never be destroyed,” he was invoking God as a benevolent rule-provider. Because of this emphasis on rules, guides, and destruction, conversion is presented as a weighty undertaking with serious consequences. A personal relationship with Jesus Christ is understood as part of spiritual warfare—fail to convert and you go to Hell, convert or recommit and you are signing up for a lifetime of struggle against the tactics of the Devil. Campers were told that being a Christian is not easy, but it is incredibly important.

The speaker continued, “Right now, you are facing danger. Every coach will tell you that you are facing danger. This is a jump for eternity—Hell waits for those who fail

to believe in Jesus when He is introduced.” He told the audience to close their eyes, and called for a raising of hands. “How many of you have a desire to know Him?” he called out. The majority of campers raised their hands, and huddle leaders gathered at the foot of the stage as the speaker invited campers making first time commitments to approach. “Heaven is cheering you on right now,” he said.²⁴⁴ Approximately 12 of the 80 or so campers walked to the foot of the stage to meet their huddle leaders. Then the speaker called for those wishing to recommit their lives to Jesus, and nearly everyone responded.

As I watched from my fifth row vantage point, almost the entire population of the camp gathered at the front of the stage. Campers formed circles with their huddle leaders and tearfully prayed for new converts and for their own recommitments. The band returned to the stage and music swelled over the scene—groups of campers crying and praying. The room felt emotionally charged as campers responded physically to the experience—hugging, laying on hands, lifting hands, calling out. “Gesturing is a way of holding one’s religion, gesturing is a way of being held by one’s religion,” writes scholar Ruel Tyson.²⁴⁵ As the athletes gathered together, they engaged in collective gesturing by laying their hands on each other. This gesture was connected to an emotional state, and those emotions were articulated as embodied knowledge of God’s active involvement in the altar call. Afterward, those involved used phrases like, “God moved my heart,” and,

²⁴⁴ Fieldnotes by author, 20 July 2007, Forest Grove, Ore.

²⁴⁵ Ruel Tyson, “Method and Spirit: Studying the Diversity of Gestures in Religion,” *Diversities of Gifts: Field Studies in Southern Religion*, eds. Ruel Tyson, James L. Peacock, and Daniel W. Patterson (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 5.

“I felt the Spirit inside me.”²⁴⁶ This way of describing the event links bodily sensations to certainty of God’s actions.

The following day, campers and huddle leaders continued to describe the experience as evidence of the existence and emotional investment of God: “I just know that God was there and was working with all of us. It was like there was a celebration in heaven and we could feel it.” One huddle leader said, “Real. I just know God was real.”²⁴⁷ For Christians at the camp, the emotional and physical experience of the altar call served to cement God’s reality and presence.

Conversion and recommitment experiences serve to distinguish evangelical Christians from the larger Christian community. The declarative moment is understood as the first stage in establishing a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Recommitment is a double acknowledgement of one’s own conversion and of the importance of conversion as an event. The conversion experience of FCA camp, with campers standing and walking to be physically close to their huddle leaders, gives the altar call an emotional and physical density that confirms the larger lessons of camp—religious belief and embodied experiences are part of a spiritual warfare that defines evangelical self-understanding.

The final morning of camp, campers were challenged to complete a grueling 25 minutes of taxing drills—Gut Check. As the second culmination moment of FCA camp, Gut Check achieved a sense of spiritual warfare by creating a situation where campers call on God as they push their bodies physically. According to the camp director, “God is

²⁴⁶ Fieldnotes by author, 21 July 2007, Forest Grove, Ore.

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

real to these kids when they can see it in their sport.”²⁴⁸ Gut Check was an attempt to make this happen.

The gym was converted into a series of 25 stations, each representing an exercise—push-ups, wall sits, calf raises, lunges, high knees, and so on. Campers and their huddle leaders spend one minute at each station with a few seconds between each exercise. There is a station for prayer, but as one camp leader reminded everyone, “Prayer is not a station for rest. Prayer is a station to ask for help.”²⁴⁹ Gut Check enacts a distinction between Christian athletes and the sporting world at large. The exercises are largely the same as those that athletes would encounter at secular training camps, but at FCA camp, athletes are meant to call on God in moments of physical exhaustion.

The atmosphere before Gut Check was tense. All week, the campers had been nervously talking about the event. In huddle the night before, Becca told the girls, “It’s okay to be scared. I was terrified for my first Gut Check. The name itself is scary enough.”²⁵⁰ In the hall before the event, I overheard two campers talking about how they were going to be “faithful teammates” and not let anyone fall behind. The challenge of Gut Check is twofold—to complete the exercises, but also to do so as a team. Despite this growing tension, the camp director reminded me that Gut Check is not about failure: “Anyone can go through Gut Check, you could go through Gut Check right now. You can do four push-ups in a minute and go through Gut Check.”²⁵¹ Since success in Gut

²⁴⁸ Fieldnotes by author, 18 July 2007, Forest Grove, Ore.

²⁴⁹ Fieldnotes by author, 22 July 2007, Forest Grove, Ore.

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

²⁵¹ Ibid.

Check is measured by completion, not speed, everyone who completes Gut Check is considered equally accomplished. No one counts how many push-ups a person does or ranks the teams at the end, and since everyone finishes at the same time, all having endured the twenty-five stations, each athlete is encouraged to feel proud of their performance without measuring it against another's.

Even though campers would be able to through Gut Check at a leisurely pace and technically complete the series of exercises, huddles pushed each other to their limits. At the limit of what campers thought they could accomplish, they were encouraged to call on God and to continue on. Through this, they learned that their limits are not where they thought they were and that they were capable of accomplishing things that were presented as terrifying and intimidating. They were meant to understand that the power to do these things comes from God. Just as they were taught that doubt and weakness are tools of Satan, Gut Check reinforced the idea that strength and perseverance come from God.

Huddle leaders encouraged the combination of athleticism and religious devotion. As the volleyball huddle began a minute of wall jumps (jumping up and down facing a wall, touching the highest point that you can reach), they joined together singing a worship song that the band had played the night before. "Yes, Lord. Yes, Lord. Yes, Yes, Lord," they sang over and over again, keeping the rhythm of jumping up and down together.²⁵² The lesson inherent in Gut Check is that calling on God will help you succeed.

²⁵² Ibid.

Marcel Mauss has argued that “body techniques” are learned social practices that reinforce social authority. He points to techniques acquired in adolescence as the most important, specifically initiation moments, noting that these techniques are often assemblages of physiological, psychological and social actions.²⁵³ Gut Check and the altar call both represent initiation moments in the FCA camp experience. They are combinations of embodied, mental, and community action resulting in a firmer belief in the reality and power of God. In the same vein, Catherine Bell has argued that the purpose of ritualized events (like Gut Check or an altar call) is the “production of ritualized agents, persons who have an instinctive knowledge of these schemes embedded in their bodies, in their sense of reality, and in their understanding of how to act in ways that both maintain and qualify the complex microrelations of power.”²⁵⁴ The FCA camp experience was constructed in such a way that campers learn to use their bodies to attain certainty of the existence of God, as well as certainty of spiritual warfare.

By narrating their lives as a battle, evangelical athletes elevate the importance of sport and integrate embodied knowledge with religious certainty. For these campers, all of life, including athletics, is part of a spiritual battle, and their ability to frame athletics in this way distinguishes them from larger sporting culture. They engage the sporting world by playing on teams yet remain distinct from it by framing sporting participation as part of an abstract and eternal battle against Satan. As I have shown, the understanding of a never-ending battle against hidden external threats was prevalent in American

²⁵³ Marcel Mauss, “Techniques of the Body” in *Sociology and Psychology: Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Routledge, 1979), 95-123.

²⁵⁴ Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 221.

political rhetoric of the time and served to reinforce the notion that there is no outside to spiritual warfare.

In addition to the central narrative of spiritual warfare, Christian athletes rely heavily on language of “Christ-likeness.” Christian athletes see conforming to Christ-likeness as an imperative in resisting the tactics of the devil, and they see the process of becoming Christ-like as important to their athletic performance. In the following chapter, I turn from the language of spiritual warfare to the language of becoming Christ-like in order to investigate this complementary facet of Christian athletic identity.

CHAPTER 6

Becoming Christ-like: Playing to Win *is* Playing for God

“It’s simple and complex at the same time.”

Two Athletes in Action basketball players are nestled in the backseat, talking about faith during one of many van rides as the team travels between colleges. Emily continues, “Like parables in the Bible, they can have such a simple message, but the more you think about it, the more complex it seems.”

Laura nods and says, “It’s like we make God into whatever is missing in our lives that we want.”

“Yeah, we make God into our desires, but God knows us better than we know ourselves. God knows us, so He knows what we make Him into.”

There is a pause.

“Yeah, it is complex,” Laura responds.²⁵⁵

As I sat listening to this conversation, I thought about the complexity of religious experience. In the previous chapter, I argued that the concept of spiritual warfare encourages a simplistic and dualistic approach to religious experience. However, there is a countervailing discourse in sports ministry that encourages a more complex understanding of religious experience: the concept of Christ-likeness. Both these ideas, spiritual warfare and Christ-likeness, were present in every sports ministry site I visited.

²⁵⁵ Fieldnotes by author, 1 November 2007, Boston, Mass.

I've chosen to treat them separately to emphasize how Christ-likeness lends itself toward multiple interpretations. The discourse of spiritual warfare tends to make God and Satan primary agents and eclipses human creativity, but the discourse of Christ-likeness attunes to the complexity that Laura and Emily's conversation begins to address. As noted in previous chapters, becoming Christ-like is an overarching goal for Christian athletes. However, as Laura and Emily's conversation illustrates, the category of Christ-likeness is not static or simple. Their conversation points to an inherent complexity in the category of Christ-likeness, a category constructed by curtailing and directing one's desires. This chapter turns to AIA's 2007 traveling basketball team to assess how desire and embodied transformations affect belief.

Each fall, Athletes in Action (AIA) organizes a women's basketball fall tour. In 2007 the team of eleven traveled from Ohio, through Canada, and across the northeast and the southeast, competing against Division I and Division II college teams. All in all, they played nine games in fifteen days, spending only a week together in Ohio before the first game to train. In addition to the eleven athletes, the traveling group included an AIA staff of two coaches, an athletic trainer, a sportswriter who maintained the team blog, and two religious leaders responsible for Christian training, mentoring, and counseling over the course of the tour. I met up with the team in Boston for their third game and stayed with the group for four games, traveling with them in vans between colleges, staying with them in hotels, and attending practices and locker room pep-talks. I parted with the team after the northeast leg of their journey and rejoined them in Virginia a few days later for the final two games of the tour. The team was made up of college, post-college, and professional players willing to dedicate three weeks of their lives to traveling around the

U.S., playing games and evangelizing. AIA teams are generally diverse, and this team was no exception: players were different ages, races, nationalities, different skill levels, and had different interpretations of what it meant to be a Christian athlete. One reason Laura and Emily's conversation is important is it demonstrates both that religious belief is a complex phenomenon and that believers themselves recognize and engage this complexity.

Desire is key to investigating the process of becoming Christ-like, and I have found the ideas of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari on desire to be particularly illuminating. "Becoming" is a key word in Deleuze and Guattari's vocabulary, and they see human becoming as an imperfect and unpredictable process of change. Deleuze and Guattari emphasize that becoming never happens perfectly, but instead is best understood as a progressive relationship between losing one's way and finding one's way. These two directions "confront and embrace each other like two wrestlers who can no longer break free from each other's grasp, and slide down a sloping line."²⁵⁶ Throughout this chapter, I treat the process of Christ-likeness as a Deleuzian becoming by attuning to the complexity of struggle that Christian athletes describe and demonstrate. Rather than presenting this as a neat trajectory, I aim to show the unpredictabilities and different interpretations of both desire and becoming.

²⁵⁶ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (London: Athlone Press, 1988), 309. This theme is also present in their previous collaborative work. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane (New York: Viking Press, 1977).

This chapter focuses on the becomings that occurred during AIA's women's fall tour, focusing on embodied experiences that were used to bolster and sustain belief.²⁵⁷ I investigate becoming in two ways. First, I turn to witnessing as a religious practice that encourages internal change through the vocalization of one's beliefs. On the tour, becoming did occur through witnessing, but witnessing was understood as a larger category than just speaking. As bodily performers, Christian athletes strive to integrate becoming Christ-like with their physical experiences and actions. The second facet that I investigate is this embodied dimension, becoming that happens through athletics. Athletic embodied experience was presented as the primary means for achieving self-transformation and as a central access point for Christ-likeness. Ultimately, I argue that becoming and the desire for Christ-likeness transform Christian athletes because Christ-likeness is understood as an embodied change. Christian athletes narrate this as a change of heart—a change located in the center of their bodies, rather than a mental shift. Recognizing the embodied dimension of religious experience and religious desire allows us to understand becoming Christ-like as a process that athletes identify physically.

²⁵⁷ Christian athletes recognize desire and becoming as complex struggles, and part of this complexity is translating Christ into an appropriate athletic model for women. As discussed in chapter three, seeing oneself as Christ-like involves paralleling athletic endurance and sacrifice with Christ's crucifixion. According to one female Christian athlete: "Part of being crucified with Christ is that when He died, my old self died, as well... I have risen with Him to a new life, and it's not I who live, but it's Christ who lives in me. Everything that Christ is, I am. It still overwhelms me to wrap my head around God's love and understand fully that when God sees me, He sees His Son."²⁵⁷ Alexandria Hagler and Janet Goreham, "Restored," *Sharing the Victory*, <http://www.sharingthevictory.com/vsItemDisplay.1sp&objectid=EA1ABF3B-607D-4522-A1046B24214D9701&method=display> (accessed 8 October 2008). This sentiment reveals that women can understand themselves as God's *son*. While, as noted in chapter four, gender remains an important category in evangelical Christianity, in sports ministry Christ-likeness is presented as a viable goal for men and women.

Christian athletes are then able to use physical experiences to understand and affirm their belief in God's power and God's plan.

A good model for transformative becoming is Susan Harding's work with fundamentalist Christians. Harding argued that witnessing, the vocalization of one's conversion and resultant effects, serves to reinforce one's beliefs. By speaking from the point of view of the converted, a Christian is granting authority to not only their own story, but the act of conversion itself and God's ability to intervene in human affairs. Harding describes the resultant belief as "a belief that indisputably transfigures you and your reality."²⁵⁸ However, in Christian athletic contexts, speaking is not the most constitutive element of believing—becoming is. Christian athletes see themselves in a process of becoming Christ-like, a process that involves focusing desire and has very pragmatic results (like increased athletic ability).

Tina, the AIA fall tour chaplain, told the players, "I am looking for a change on this team. I want to see you play *with* God more than *for* God. Because playing *for* God can still be about you—I want to see you play *with* God."²⁵⁹ Rather than overtly dedicating their performance to God, players were encouraged to internalize religious desire during their athletic performance. Playing *with* God meant playing with an intentional recognition of Christ's spirit within. Though Christ-likeness was understood as the goal, AIA staff and players also understood pure Christ-likeness as an impossible task for humans. Because of this, Christ-likeness functions as an unattainable goal,

²⁵⁸ Susan Friend Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000), 60.

²⁵⁹ Fieldnotes by author, 2 November 2007, Amherst, Mass.

making Christian athletes experience constant desire and making desire itself an integral component of Christian athletic identity.

Laura and Emily's conversation on "making God into our desires" addresses the influence that desire has on belief. Laura expressed frustration and worry that God was defined by human desire. However, Emily's response was, "God knows us better than we know ourselves... He knows what we make Him into." This reveals a belief that desire is an intentional tool of God. Emily reassured Laura that complexity of desire was acceptable because God intentionally uses those desires. Christian athletes have a desire for Christ-likeness, but Christ-likeness does not mean the same thing to everyone and can serve to demonstrate the complexity of Christian athletic experience.

Before investigating this complexity, it may be helpful to establish the historical trajectory of AIA traveling teams to contextualize this particular field site. When Athletes in Action formed in 1966 as the athletic branch of Campus Crusade for Christ, its primary project was a competitive men's basketball team that toured the United States playing college teams during pre-season. The team's emphasis was primarily evangelistic. During halftime, players would don red, white and blue jumpsuits and deliver their testimony as well as a gospel message based on Bill Bright's four spiritual laws. By the mid-1970s, the men's team had become nationally and internationally recognized, hosting games in southern California for crowds of over 7,000 and defeating highly ranked college teams. The 1978 team represented the U.S. in international competition, winning the Western Hemisphere championship and finishing fifth in the International Basketball Federation (FIBA) World Championship. AIA sports writer Joe Smalley describes the team of the 1980s:

Athletes in Action has also proven an innovator. The athletic ministry is the only program in America whereby a post-college basketball player can continue to train full time, compete against top quality competition *and* retain his amateur status. America's international athletic future lies with the post-college athletes and with programs like Athletes in Action.²⁶⁰

However, after a 1989 rule change by FIBA, professional athletes were allowed to represent the United States in international competitions. This meant that post-college basketball players no longer had to maintain amateur status to continue to train and compete at an international level. Shortly thereafter, the NCAA altered their regulations regarding pre-season Division I games for men's basketball, and the AIA men's team could no longer schedule competitions with these schools.

Today, the AIA men's basketball team primarily focuses on international tours, but based on the success of the men's basketball team, AIA formed other touring groups. Women were involved in AIA's traveling gymnastic and track teams in the late 1970s, and the first women's basketball team was formed in 1990. While the initial focus of AIA traveling teams was a half-time gospel message delivered by team members, host institutions progressively marginalized this practice. Over the course of the 1990s, AIA's testimony was pushed to the edges of the game and the court; they moved from halftime to post-game, they moved from center-court to the end zone or to a small room provided by the host institution, and at most games today, they are not allowed to witness at all. They do, however, pass out programs containing team testimonies to the audience. According to AIA basketball staff, "Slowly, over the years, schools did not want to upset alumni or boosters who may be in the audience, so they would not allow us to share at

²⁶⁰ Joe Smalley, *More Than a Game* (San Bernadino, Calif.: Here's Life Publishers, 1981), 144 (emphasis in original).

halftime. Many would allow us to share after the game as a consolation and then after time, even that stopped. These days it is rare that we are permitted to share.”²⁶¹

As the number of listeners and the practice of witnessing declined, AIA shifted their emphasis from oral witnessing to demonstrating belief through intensity on the court. Smalley writes of a 1980 men’s basketball tournament in Europe:

AIA would not be permitted to present its usual halftime evangelistic program, so all the team’s talking would be done on the court. And the trip to Europe provided a unique opportunity to disclaim a deeply-imbedded European stereotype about Christianity—that Christians are ‘sissies,’ in need of a crutch.²⁶²

On-court intensity replaced narrative witnessing as the key goal of athletic tours. Players emphasized on-court behavior (sportsmanship, toughness, endurance) as central to demonstrating that Christians are worthy competitors. They also wanted to demonstrate something to themselves—that Jesus Christ was an appropriate model for athletic behavior. As in Wes Neal’s formulation of this goal, athletic sensation was framed in terms of a Christ-like struggle, making athletic pain and athletic pleasure integral components of Christian athletic identity.

This is not to say that speaking about one’s religious life has disappeared from AIA. Far from it. For example, each night of the tour, a different player would share her “life story,” chronicling the important moments in her life that led to her participation on AIA’s team. These stories were often about basketball, God, and the struggle to unite the two. Many players’ life stories involved a moment when the player turned away from God because of a trauma in her life—an injury, a death in the family, a heartbreak, or a bitterness about sport. Since these players all chose to participate in an evangelical

²⁶¹ Interview by author, electronic mail, 19 April 2008.

²⁶² Smalley, *More Than a Game*, 145.

basketball tour, their stories would culminate in re-embracing of Christianity. For example, after Laura told us about a number of difficult moments in her life, she said, “I never would have made it through that time without relying on God and the people that God put in my life.”²⁶³ In these stories, God was presented as a primary agent, overtly affecting the lives of these women.

Another player, Maria, used religion to understand her place on her college team. She read a poem describing her experience of sitting the bench yet yearning for a professional career:

In the Bible it said first shall finish last,
And last was me.
It hurt, it was painful because I knew I was good
even my own teammates didn't understand it
I asked God why can't I play dammit?
I remained positive but I spent many nights with tears.
I cried out to God, for four freakin years...²⁶⁴

As her college career was ending, Maria had a conversation with a teammate about a Russian coach looking for a player like her. This conversation led to her career in a professional overseas league.

God gave me a contact
a month later I had a contract.
I went from being on the bench
to playing with and against
Olympians and WNBA players.
Why, because I stayed focused on God and didn't listen to these haters.
So I stand before you today,
knowing that God can and will make a way.²⁶⁵

²⁶³ Fieldnotes by author, 30 October 2007, Boston, Mass.

²⁶⁴ Fieldnotes by author, 8 November 2007, Lynchburg, Va.

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

Learning to share testimonies like these is an important component of Christian athletic identity. The players on the team were able to hear each other's stories and practice telling their own life story as a religious narrative.

However, for Christian athletes, speaking is only one part of bolstering belief. Athletes are bodily performers. And, while the women on the AIA team and staff certainly spoke a great deal—delivered testimony, discussed bible verses, had long talks about spirituality and belief during innumerable hours traveling in vans—they understood their primary evangelistic power as athletic, embodied, and performative. Tina told the team several times, “Share the gospel everyday, and, when you have to, use words.”²⁶⁶ After one game, some spectators approached Tina to compliment the AIA team on their intensity despite the fact that they weren't playing for any recognizable reward. She told the team, “You were a tremendous testament in your playing to that other team and to the crowd... You did a great job of sharing without words last night.”²⁶⁷ For evangelical athletes, athletic performance itself is a form of witnessing and, like speaking, can function to confirm belief.

In the evangelical athletic community, faith, belief, and Christ-likeness are largely understood as a continuum. Certain people are construed as further along in the process than others. In Tina's words, “Some of [the players] really get it, and some of them are very new to this. They are all interested in growing spiritually and understand God, but some of them are still learning about Jesus.” She held out her hands to demonstrate a

²⁶⁶ This quotation was attributed to St. Francis of Assisi by the AIA sports writer that accompanied the team. Interview by author, electronic mail, 16 April 2008.

²⁶⁷ Fieldnotes by authors, 2 November 2007, Amherst, Mass.

continuum. “Some of them are here,” she said, pointing to a point near the far side.

“And some of them are here,” pointing to a much earlier point.²⁶⁸

The idea of Christ-likeness as a continuum has permeated sports ministry. Sports ministers Lowrie McCown and Valerie Gin use the idea of a continuum of Christ-likeness to explore the tasks and goals of evangelical athletic organizations. They present Christ-likeness as a scale from negative ten to positive ten: -10 is someone who has never heard the gospel, 10 represents Christ-likeness (although the authors are clear that a human can never fully reach this state). Zero is understood as a conversion moment when one makes a commitment to Christianity, what they call a “change of allegiance.”²⁶⁹ McCown and Gin emphasize that people move on this scale. Using their method, it is fully conceivable that a person can swing back and forth between a five and a negative three or a three and a nine, making the pursuit of Christ-likeness a highly dynamic process.

Additionally, McCown and Gin’s spiritual continuum reassesses the importance of conversion. Presenting conversion as a zero on the scale makes the post-conversion move toward Christ-likeness just as valuable as the pre-conversion move from -10 to zero. They write:

Our typical standard of evaluation is based on numbers and logic. Of course, it is much easier to measure someone reaching the point of conversion than it is to measure someone moving from a ‘-5’ to a ‘-3’ on the continuum. Nevertheless, it is still very possible to have an effective ministry that may never see people come

²⁶⁸ Fieldnotes by author, 30 October 2007, Boston, Mass.

²⁶⁹ Lowrie McCown and Valeria J. Gin, *Focus on Sport in Ministry* (Marietta, Ga.: 360° Sports, 2003), 85.

to Christ at the 'X' [zero] point yet is still helping them journey from '-10' to a '-8' or from a '-5' to a '-3.'²⁷⁰

With this reevaluation of the importance of conversion, McCown and Gin recommend that sports ministers balance evangelism to the unconverted with discipleship for the committed.

This understanding was evident in AIA's approach to their touring players. On the AIA team, discipleship (how one learns to be Christ-like after conversion) took precedence over witnessing (how one learns to be Christ-like before conversion). McCown and Gin label a person who is actively engaged in witnessing a "+5," meaning "a person who is engaged in 'spiritual reproduction,' exhibiting and sharing the love of Christ with others, which leads them to grow toward Christ."²⁷¹ Evangelical athletes, in addition to learning and practicing witnessing skills, learn and practice an athletic perspective that advances their post-conversion progression on the continuum of Christ-likeness. Much of this focuses on athletic behaviors that are meant to demonstrate Christ-likeness to others.

Tina explained it this way, "Christ-likeness to me is a process. The opportunities to be Christ-like normally come at the moments when, in our human-ness, we least want to think about being Christ-like!"²⁷² Tina experienced this in her struggle to give up cursing. Language is a very important part of Christian witnessing, not only because story-telling is integral to evangelism but because language serves as a category to judge

²⁷⁰ Ibid.

²⁷¹ Ibid., 84

²⁷² Interview by author, electronic mail, 29 February 2008.

Christian dedication. A coach that curses constantly but professes Christianity will not be taken as seriously as a Christian coach with clean language. Likewise, a player cursing on the court will lose credibility as a Christian witness. However, for many Christians including Tina, this is not an easy habit to change. She described her experience:

Believe it or not, I used to cuss like a long shoreman!! At some point in reading the Bible, I began to notice a lot of verses having to do with the tongue or with our mouths and what types of things come out of it. I got pretty convicted about it and started working on it. It took a while for it to change and at some point I no longer thought about it, it was just different. I remember noticing the change one day when I hit my head on the corner of a cabinet. Old Tina would've let out the F bomb before she could even think about what she was saying. But I think I said something like, "Man, that hurts!!" And later it dawned on me that something had changed within.²⁷³

Tina narrated this as an internal change, brought about by her increased attention to sacred texts and Godly practices. When her actions became habit, rather than forced, she became fully integrated with the practice. In this way, she was not imitating Christ, but instead, her desire to become Christ-like influenced her behavior in a way that she understood as proximity to Christ. "It gets to the point where you don't have to stop and think about your behavioral choice. You just do the Christ-like thing because it has become your nature."²⁷⁴ Instances like this serve to confirm belief. Cursing, especially on the court, would cause others to question a Christian athlete's sincerity and that would be detrimental to the goal of demonstrating Christ-like behavior. If a Christian athlete or coach is able to alter this behavior, they are likely to attribute the change to God working in their lives. This understanding of the accomplished change reinforces belief in God's power.

²⁷³ Ibid.

²⁷⁴ Ibid.

Another player, Abby, said, “It’s not enough to have a cross on your uniform anymore, you have to bring it on the court, really demonstrate that you’re a Christian.”²⁷⁵ A cross on a uniform may symbolize belief, but it is in practical applications that one demonstrates Christ-likeness. Abby said, “I’m not gonna shoot and hold my follow-through like I’m all that, because it’s not about me. It’s never about me. It’s about Him.”²⁷⁶ This loss of self is a moment of becoming Christ-like, but it is not an imitation of Christ—Jesus never played basketball after all. Instead, Abby’s behaviors are an attempt to relate to basketball in the way that Christ would. She doesn’t hold her follow-through, but she also doesn’t think about it. It just happens. She just brings it. For Abby, behavior rather than identification undergirds Christian athleticism. When she is able to demonstrate behaviors that she identifies as Christ-like (not holding her follow-through), she shores up her belief in the possibility of becoming Christ-like.

Becoming Christ-like has pragmatic effects for Christian athletes. They count on Christ-likeness to give them the ability to play through exhaustion, remain composed under pressure, deal with loss and injuries, and cultivate a perspective where their self-worth is not determined by their athletic performance. During a half-time locker room discussion, a player named Stacey told the other players, “Honestly, girls, call on Him. I’m running. I’m tired. And, that’s when I know I can’t do it alone. That’s when you just have to ask, and He will surprise you.”²⁷⁷ During the second half of that game, Stacey would lift her eyes to the ceiling in moments of extreme exhaustion. Then, she

²⁷⁵ Fieldnotes by author, 31 October 2007, Boston, Mass.

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

²⁷⁷ Fieldnotes by author, 1 November 2007, Boston, Mass.

would keep going. Calling on God didn't physically turn Stacey into Jesus, but it allowed her to imagine continuing to play and then enact it.

This mirrors the mission of a recently published AIA training text called *Game Day Glory*. According to the authors, "We have been called to be 'little Christs' in our very attitudes, dispositions, and actions."²⁷⁸ They outline five principles for Christian athletic engagement that are meant to foster a process of Christ-likeness: Audience of One ("God owns you and your sport."); Inside Game ("God's love is the maximum motivation."); Holy Sweat ("God provides resources for spiritual training to cultivate Christlike character."); Hurtin' for Certain ("God allows pain and trials to deepen your character for Him."); and Victory Beyond Competition ("God's playing field extends beyond your competition.").²⁷⁹ As a whole, the text promotes the idea that the Christian athlete should strive toward Christ-likeness by using athletics as a worship opportunity.

For example, according to the first principle, "Audience of One," Christian athletes are to perceive God as the only witness to their athletic experience, and therefore should "allow [their] effort, intensity, regard for the game and the opponent, and respect for the coach and referees to (non-verbally) 'shout' thank you to God with your whole being."²⁸⁰ Following this, the second principle states that an athletic performance motivated by praising God will allow the athlete to access increased ability and a feeling of elation.²⁸¹ They write:

²⁷⁸ White and White, *Game Day Glory*, 70.

²⁷⁹ Ibid., 22, 48, 72, 96, and 121.

²⁸⁰ Ibid., 34.

²⁸¹ This is similar to Wes Neal's "Total Release Performance." See chapter three.

That means your new, intrinsic motivation in Christ frees you to mentally and emotionally cope with factors like fear, anxiety, anger, pressure, guilt, worry, self-doubt, and negative self-talk, which can prevent and disrupt you from flourishing as a human being and experiencing in sport that optimal experience called “flow” or “in the zone.” God’s love releases you and allows you to completely go for it...²⁸²

AIA staff referred to this experience as a worship performance. Michelle, the assistant coach, described a game where she had this experience from the bench. As she watched her team from the bench, she said she could feel God’s power and energy present in her cheering and team support.²⁸³

Simply understanding that a worship performance is possible does not immediately lead to one. One halftime, when the team was losing, I mentioned to an AIA staffer that the players seemed tired and depressed. She responded, “Yeah, most people don’t understand that it’s more than just basketball. God is working in their lives, and that can take a lot out of you.”²⁸⁴ AIA fall tour had a rigorous traveling schedule, and players never had the luxury of a home court. The travel and the intensity of their religious goals made for an exhausting combination. Clearly, combining one’s body with the intangible body of Christ is only apparent in its effects. And, as players sought to experience Christ-likeness on the court, they could be discouraged if they couldn’t pinpoint results. AIA attempted to create a situation where becoming Christ-like was possible, but it was by no means inevitable.

²⁸² White and White, *Game Day Glory*, 46.

²⁸³ Fieldnotes by author, 2 November 2007, Amherst, Mass. Scholars of religion and sport often describe this spectator sensation as Durkheimian effervescence. See, for example, Susan Birrell, “Sport as Ritual: Interpretations from Durkheim to Goffman,” *Social Forces* 60 (1981): 354-76.

²⁸⁴ Fieldnotes by author, 7 November 2007, Blacksburg, Va.

A few players expressed concern and frustration that they weren't playing basketball as intensely on the AIA team as they had on other teams. One player said:

I was really at peace, but then I was confused because I wasn't playing as hard or as competitively. And it was nice not to have that pressure. Not to feel like, "Oh, we lost. We're gonna have to run tomorrow." Or, "We gotta watch tape and look at our mistakes." No, it's like, "Hey, we got another game tomorrow."²⁸⁵

Tina responded:

Yeah, all the things that used to motivate you are not there, so you have to rethink what motivates you. It's like we were talking yesterday with Michelle that when you start trying to implement this stuff, there's an initial decline in performance. And it will go up. It will go up better than you were before. And you don't decline because suddenly you're playing for God. You decline because you're trying to figure it out.²⁸⁶

In this response, Tina makes both decline and improvement symptoms of becoming Christ-like. Both sensations are then open to possible interpretation as religious experience.

Even injuries were understood as opportunities for religious growth. For example, Jenna was suffering from a knee injury and told the team, "If I can't play, then I'm just dead weight and I should go home." Stacey responded, "You are here for a reason. We are all here for a reason. God brought this group together for this tour and it's no accident that we are all together right now."²⁸⁷ Stacey's ability to understand injury as part of God's plan represents a moment of solidifying belief. Because pain is one inevitable component of the rigorous fall tour training and game schedule,

²⁸⁵ Fieldnotes by author, 2 November 2007, Amherst, Mass.

²⁸⁶ Ibid.

²⁸⁷ Fieldnotes by author, 31 October 2007, Boston, Mass.

positioning this pain as evidence of God's involvement serves to confirm God's existence and intervention in their Christian athletic lives.

The second to last game of the tour was a rough loss. I sat on the bench with the team and watched as Stacey, one of the senior players, cheered for the team despite the ongoing defeat. She would yell, "De-fense!" (clap, clap), and gesture to everyone else to join in. At one point, Maria came off the court looking exhausted, and she sat down saying, "This sucks." Stacey gave her an intense glare and cheered louder.

In the locker room after the game, the players scattered on benches eating sandwiches and drinking Gatorade. Stacey had taken a bad knock to the face during the game and was nursing a cut lip. She misspoke about something and then joked to the trainer, "I think I have a concussion." Everyone laughed and went on eating. About fifteen minutes later, Laura knelt by Stacey's chair and Stacey looked noticeably paler. Laura called for the trainer, who took Stacey out to the hallway to get some air. In the locker room, the atmosphere was tense—players looked at their half-eaten sandwiches, not knowing whether to keep eating or follow Stacey to the hallway. The trainer appeared in the doorway and motioned the team to come out to the hall.

Maria was praying over Stacey with her hands on her. The players all reached out to Stacey and touched her on her head and shoulders, with Maria saying, "Please, heal Stacey, God. We know that you are Lord and that you can heal her. You say it in your word. You are not man that you can lie, you can heal her and we know this." The other players responded with "Amen" and "Yes, Lord." After a short while, the trainer sent the team back into the locker room. Everyone sat down with their sandwiches again, but Maria said, "Can we just pray for her? I mean, we can eat later." The women formed a

circle in the locker room and each one prayed for Stacey. By the time everyone had contributed, an ambulance had arrived.

When the team filed back out into the hallway, Stacey was lying on the floor and the attending EMT was asking her questions. She responded normally and her pulse and blood pressure were normal. The EMT said that she had experienced an anxiety attack. Back in the locker room, Abby, laughingly, said, “We prayed the devil right out of her.” Stacey said she didn’t know what happened, leaving the event open to interpretation.²⁸⁸

Stacey’s episode is one example of religious experience as a physical, embodied event. Her physical state was treated as a situation that God could and would heal. Maria’s prayer demonstrates a belief that God intervenes at a bodily level, and Stacey’s recovery then confirmed her belief. However, not every episode of praying over injuries had the same outcome. At the end of one practice, the team encircled several injured players and prayed over them, laying on hands. During a moment of tension the next day, one of the injured players, Tanya, told another teammate, “You all laid on your hands like you got the healing power of Jesus, but I’m still hurt, so don’t be acting like you healed me.”²⁸⁹ Tanya was less invested in the project of AIA than other players on the team. She would roll her eyes at the constant use of Christian language and distanced herself from her more evangelistic teammates.

In contrast to Tanya’s skepticism, Tina would narrate team tensions as instances of spiritual warfare or as a trial that God intended them to overcome. For example, early in the tour, it became evident that there was tension between players and coaches. After

²⁸⁸ Fieldnotes by author, 7 November 2007, Blacksburg, Va.

²⁸⁹ Fieldnotes by author, 31 October 2007, Boston, Mass.

one practice, Tina spoke to the whole team about tensions surrounding their relationship with the head coach. “Alright, you all need to have a discussion right now about what’s going on, because there is some serious tension that needs to be dealt with. Talk it out, then choose two players to go and talk to Coach.”

The conversation became heated almost before Tina left the room. Jenna spoke up, “I am feeling disrespected. I feel like all that we did at training camp, where we’re all equal, is out... I feel like the other day when I was like, ‘I just need to step away,’ and coach was like, ‘We have to pray for you then,’ made me feel like I was doing something wrong. And I hate that.”

Jenna wasn’t the only one feeling disrespected on the team, but Stacey tried to reframe the situation as part of God’s plan for the team. “Whenever there’s animosity, it’s always a little bit you and a little bit the other person. There is spiritual warfare, and we have to be aware of how the devil will come between us. We’re all here for the same reason.”

Tanya mumbled something from behind an ice pack on her lip. “I got something to say.” Everyone turned to listen. “Are we playing to win? Or are we playing for God? Because I feel like we’re playing to win. Because if we’re playing for God, how come she didn’t get in the game?” she asked, pointing to Laura who didn’t play the night before. “I mean, we were up by 10 points, 15 points. If we’re playing for God, we all gotta feel that Godly love, you know what I’m saying? I mean, it’s confusing.”

Abby responded, “Part of playing for God *is* playing to win.” This response is open to two complementary interpretations. First, Abby could have meant that *winning* was important because it demonstrated to others that Christianity does not diminish one’s

athletic ability and would allow the team to gain a larger audience for Christianity. Second, she could have meant that *trying to win* was important because it is within this competitive struggle that one is most likely to call on God and experience progress toward Christ-likeness.

A number of other players weighed in on the issue of playing to win and the general consensus was that playing to win is important, playing as a team is important, and balancing those two things is difficult. Laura was in an especially difficult situation, because she hadn't played in any of the games at that point and everyone else had. "Of course, I want to play. I came here to play. But if coach doesn't have a place for me on the floor, then I have to deal with that. And of course it brings up my own insecurities. Like, I'm gonna think I suck or that I'm not good enough, but those are my insecurities and I have to deal with them."²⁹⁰ Laura's language does not invoke a struggle toward Christ-likeness but a struggle with herself. If Christ-likeness is most often enacted during intense athletic experiences, then lack of access to these experiences may affect one's desire for Christ-likeness. And, if confirmation of the possibility of Christ-likeness serves to bolster belief (and I argue it does), athletes who don't experience this confirmation will be less likely to invest in the evangelistic project of AIA. This was true on fall tour where the two players with the least amount of playing time, Laura and Tanya, were the most likely to criticize Athletes in Action and to resist framing their participation in religious terms.

The next night, the team had an exciting come-from-behind victory at University of Massachusetts. Down 41-27 at the half, the team rallied and won 94-83 in overtime.

²⁹⁰ Fieldnotes by author, 1 November 2007, Boston, Mass.

Throughout the second half, Tina and Stacey would yell things like, “What was that? That was the Holy Spirit!” after a successful basket or “Who do you play for?!” to keep the team energized. After the win, Abby clapped me on the shoulder, saying, “You just witnessed a miracle.” The team’s victory was largely understood as a religious event that affirmed the power of God. AIA’s traveling sports writer wrote on the team blog, “The incredible thing about this win is that the girls knew that it was Jesus who carried them, made their shots fall in the second half (they scored 27 in the whole first half and 17 alone in OT), gave them extra energy to persevere and ultimately win the game. Even more exciting than their win is that they seemed to get that realization at the end.”²⁹¹

The team was elated—except Laura. She didn’t play. While the team was milling about in the lobby, laughing and joking with the other team after the game, a teary-eyed Laura ducked into a utility closet. “I don’t want to be sad. I don’t want to cry about it. If it weren’t just me, if there were other players sitting on the bench too... But, it’s just me. And, I feel really isolated.”²⁹²

Tanya left the tour the next day. She felt that the enterprise of AIA was hypocritical. “When we won [against UMass], it was all about God’s power, but the night before, when we lost, no one said a word about Jesus.”²⁹³ Tanya and I left Boston on the same day, and when I rejoined the team in Virginia a few days later, no one

²⁹¹ “Athletes in Action Fall Tour Blog,” posted on 3 November 2007, accessed via electronic mail, 16 April 2008.

²⁹² Fieldnotes by author, 3 November 2007, Boston, Mass.

²⁹³ Fieldnotes by author, 3 November 2007, Boston, Mass.

mentioned her. They had prayed for her as she was leaving, saying, “Everything happens for a reason,” but once she was gone, it was almost like she had never been there.

During the last ten minutes of a losing game, the coach sent Laura in from the bench. The team began to cheer for her, and when she made a three-point shot, everyone on the bench rose to their feet, exploding in cheers. After the game, Stacey asked Laura, “How did it feel when you made that shot?” Laura responded, “It felt normal. Like if I would have made that on my team, no one would have cared. But everyone was really excited because I don’t play that much. That’s the difference. Everyone went nuts for me.”²⁹⁴ Laura noticed that her playing time received heightened attention because it was a point of contention with the coach. She felt uncomfortable with the extra attention and sought to normalize her sporting experience rather than elevate it by narrating it as a religious experience. Tanya’s departure and Laura’s discomfort fall outside the narrative of becoming Christ-like and were largely overlooked by the rest of the team and coaches.

For the Christian athlete, conforming oneself to Christ-likeness is part of effective witnessing. Becoming Christ-like, playing to win, and playing for God are all part of the same project—demonstrating and confirming a belief in the power of an intervening God. The intended effect of combining these practices is to produce athletes capable of playing at their maximal potential and garnering an attentive audience to listen to their testimony. However, this process is not a guaranteed or uniformly distributed part of playing on a Christian team, as Laura and Tanya’s experiences demonstrate.

For Christian athletes, becoming is believing. Becoming Christ-like is an overarching component, and it is a complicated relationship between desire and effect. The

²⁹⁴ Fieldnotes by author, 7 November 2007, Blacksburg, Va.

moments that Christian athletes experience as Christ-like occur in their athletic performances and serve to verify the possibility of Christ-likeness and, by extension, the power of God. Recognizing that athletic embodied experiences can serve to verify belief and transform a believer's behaviors and outlook is important for understanding how Christian athletic experience is different from evangelical experience generally, and this can help explain the continued growth of sports ministry. Christian athletes use their on-court experiences as measures of their teammates' and their own desire for Christ-likeness. They see athletic behavior as a form of witnessing, and in becoming athletic witnesses they open to a transformative faith. We might ask, is there something particular to sport that encourages this transformation? I argue that there is, and I turn to this in the next chapter. I explore how the structures of sport and the structures of evangelical Christianity form an intertwining and mutually reinforcing knowledge network that connects sporting and religious authority, community, and identity in the lives of Christian athletes.

Chapter 7

Interlocking Logics: The Parallel Practices of Evangelicalism and Sport

Mid-afternoon on the first day of their team retreat, the Charlotte Lady Eagles gathered around an unlit fire pit to listen to Amanda explain how to know God personally. The team of Christian soccer players had heard this message before (many of them were raised in Christian families, played or coached for Christian colleges, and all of them were spending their summer playing for an evangelistic soccer team). Despite their familiarity with the message, hearing it from a veteran goalkeeper and a model evangelist made them listen closely.

Amanda said, “How do you know God? Through accepting Jesus.” She emphasized that this acceptance of Jesus was a starting point and, thereafter, Christians are expected to grow in their faith and in their knowledge of God’s power. She said:

God is asking you to believe and to trust Him. The Bible helps build your trust. I accepted Christ when I was 6, but at 15, I really opened to the Word. It’s a constant process, but the first thing you have to do is accept Christ into your heart. Think about when you decided, I want to be a soccer player. That was a choice, and that choice means choosing to practice and be surrounded by other players. When you reflect on how far you’ve come since you first made that decision... God knocks on your heart and we have to open the door. If you say to Him, ‘You’ve got to show me,’ I promise you, He will. Just like you didn’t see the benefit of those foundation moves, but that’s evidence that you have grown in your sport.²⁹⁵

²⁹⁵ Fieldnotes by author, 17 May 2008, Charlotte, N.C.

The parallel between advancing one's knowledge of sport and advancing one's knowledge of Christianity holds in more ways than one. Amanda framed her story this way to demonstrate to a group of elite athletes the extent of change that was possible after choosing to be a Christian. This comparison works for these women because they made definite decisions to be soccer players and dedicated vast amounts of time and energy to pursuing soccer careers. However, Amanda's comparison also references a similarity in how one learns to be an expert soccer player and how one learns to be an expert evangelist—by practice. Sport and evangelical Christianity form interlocking logics, mutually reinforcing each other through similar understandings of authority, identity, and community. In this way, Christian athletic knowledge functions as a thought style: “a conceptually coherent, perceptually stable, pragmatically reliable set of ideas and practices experienced as right and fitting by the members of a community.”²⁹⁶

This chapter investigates how athletic and religious practices intertwine and mutually strengthen each other. For Christian athletes, God's presence and intervention is concretely located in sporting experience, while at the same time, sport is used metaphorically to describe and understand Christianity. To explore this connection, I focus on three facets of knowledge production—authority, communication, and group distinction. These defining features combine to produce a knowledge network that confirms for its participants the authority of Bible, the importance of prayer, and the necessity of standing apart from secular culture. As Michel Foucault has shown, the production of knowledge about oneself is a key method for maintaining hierarchical

²⁹⁶ Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Scandalous Knowledge: Science, Truth and the Human* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 61. Smith is explaining a central concept in the work of Ludwik Fleck. Ludwik Fleck, *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact*, trans. Fred Bradley and Thaddeus J. Trenn (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

structures of power. Foucault asks, “How have certain kinds of interdictions required the price of certain kinds of knowledge about oneself?”²⁹⁷ He answers this by turning to technologies of the self, the operations that people perform on their own “bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and ways of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection or immortality.”²⁹⁸ For Foucault, technologies of the self are always connected to technologies of power, practice that determine relationships of domination. Using these ideas to explore sports ministry means examining the ways that participants negotiate between knowledge of themselves and knowledge of hierarchical structures.

Foucault’s work forms a backdrop for my guiding questions on the production of knowledge. Additionally I have found Ludwik Fleck’s work on thought collectives to be a helpful tool in this investigation. Like Foucault, Fleck argued that knowledge production constrains and directs human investigations by determining appropriate strategies and interactions. The Charlotte Lady Eagles’ thought collective demonstrated this by producing and maintaining knowledge that affirmed coaching and divine authority as well as hierarchical differences between men and women and between Christians and non-Christians. I argue that since sport and evangelical Christianity both rely on difference and hierarchy, when these systems combine they serve to mutually strengthen each other.

²⁹⁷ Michel Foucault, “Technologies of the Self” in *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, ed. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick H. Hutton (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 17

²⁹⁸ Ibid., 18.

In the summer of 2008, I observed and participated in the sports ministry training program for the Charlotte Lady Eagles. The Lady Eagles are a women's elite soccer team that competes in the W-league, a semi-professional league of 36 teams across the United States and Canada. In the summer of 2008, the W-league was the highest ranked national women's soccer league in North America.²⁹⁹ Like all the teams in the league, the Charlotte Lady Eagles were owned and operated by an independent organization. Their parent organization was Missionary Athletes International (MAI), an organization that formed in the mid-1980s with the goal of using soccer as an international platform for Christian witnessing. Throughout the 1980s, MAI sponsored men's soccer tours internationally and soccer camps in the U.S. In 1993, MAI purchased their first USL (United Soccer Leagues) men's team, the Charlotte Eagles, based in Charlotte, North Carolina. MAI began sponsoring women's international tours in the early 1990s, and founded the Charlotte Lady Eagles in 2000. In 2001, MAI purchased two Premier Development League (PDL) franchises that operate out of Chicago and Southern California. Altogether, the organization owns and operates four competitive teams, sponsors multiple men's and women's international tours each year, and holds summer camps and clinics for nearly 3000 soccer youth in the United States.³⁰⁰

During the season I spent with the Charlotte Lady Eagles, I joined them for sports ministry classes twice a week for six weeks and attended their practices and games.

²⁹⁹ In the fall of 2008, there were try-outs for the newly reformed WUSA, a professional women's soccer league that is higher ranked than the W-league.

³⁰⁰ "Doing Sports Ministry," MAI Soccer, http://maisoccer.com/main/index.php?option=com_content&task=section&id=20&Itemid=126 (accessed 27 July 2008).

Sports ministry training addressed central issues of Christian athleticism including identity, competition, motivation, gamesmanship, pride, and witnessing. I observed a system of authority in place as those who were veteran players or starters assumed teaching roles, demonstrating both athletic and religious expertise. Players that were respected for their role on the field were also granted authority in debates surrounding Christian practices. Communication of key ideas and practices often occurred in the context of prayer, elevating prayer as a particularly salient educational moment for the team. The Lady Eagles, and Christian athletes generally, prided themselves on being different from non-Christian athletes. Throughout sports ministry training, they cultivated this distinction by relying on language that differentiated “us” from “the world.”³⁰¹ This chapter will show how these three facets—authority, communication, and distinction—combined to produce knowledge of what it means to be a Christian athlete and how to demonstrate that knowledge to others.

Authority for the Lady Eagles stemmed from two sources—the Bible and particular types of people. The people in authority positions on the team—coaches, captains, and veteran players—led sports ministry training. The lessons that they presented to the team were bolstered with multiple biblical references, connecting personal and biblical authority. As noted in chapter four, gender is a functioning index of authority in the sporting world and within evangelicalism; men are granted more authority than women. The head coach for the Lady Eagles as well as the first sports ministry instructor were men. Liz, an assistant coach, said, “If you are a man coaching

³⁰¹ As noted in chapter five, distinction is an important element of Christian Smith’s definition of American evangelical Christianity. See Christian Smith, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

woman, you have to do something to lose their respect, but if you are woman, you have to earn it.”³⁰² In Liz’s experience, female athletes were more responsive to male coaches than female coaches, and for her, this was factual evidence of a basic truth of gender relations—men are naturally better leaders. This normalization of male expertise on the playing field stems from the historical and cultural affiliation of athleticism and manliness that I addressed in chapter two as well as the evangelical model of gender hierarchy that I addressed in chapter four. Men were the first authorities encountered both on the field and in the classroom, serving to reinforce this normative gender hierarchy.

On the second day of sports ministry training, Dylan, a veteran player on the men’s team, asked the players to draw a triangle on a sheet of paper, saying, “Now, imagine this triangle is you, and like an iceberg, 90% of you is hidden.” He divided the triangle into four sections from top to bottom. “People can see this part,” he said, pointing to the triangle tip, which he labeled *Behaviors*. “Everything else is hidden.” He labeled the other sections, *Emotions*, *Thoughts*, and *Beliefs*. “Christ wants to change our lives from the bottom up,” Dylan said, indicating the bottom of the triangle, the word *Beliefs*.³⁰³

This exercise was meant to demonstrate to the players that belief is the core of Christian identity. In the early stages of sports ministry training, players were taught that belief in the saving power of Jesus Christ is what makes this group a community. They were then told that their beliefs influence the other sections of the triangle; their thoughts,

³⁰² Fieldnotes by author, 7 May 2008, Charlotte, N.C.

³⁰³ Ibid.

emotions, and behaviors. According to Dylan, “Christ did not come for behavior management.”³⁰⁴ For the Eagles, integration into the community begins with a declaration of belief, which in turn affects one’s understandings of events, reactions to others, and social comportment.

This idea of central beliefs affecting thoughts, emotions, and behaviors is not new or specific to evangelical Christianity. The idea of deep-seated beliefs affecting knowledge is central to Fleck’s epistemological analysis. He wrote:

If we define ‘thought collective’ as a community of persons mutually exchanging ideas or maintaining intellectual interaction, we will find by implication that it also provides the special ‘carrier’ for the historical development of any field of thought, as well as for the given stock of knowledge and level of culture. This we have designated thought style.³⁰⁵

Fleck argued that thought styles are necessary for the development and maintenance of any community. Because of this, thought styles are highly resistant to change. This was observable in the Charlotte Lady Eagles’ community surrounding the issue of injury. Many of the veteran athletes on the team confessed an initial misunderstanding of what it meant to play for the Eagles. They had originally thought that since they were on a Christian team, they would automatically have a winning season and be safe from injury. However, injuries were prevalent on the team. The Christian athletic thought style professes that every event is part of God’s plan and that all God’s actions are loving. How, then, can one explain injuries?

During the first practice I observed, there was a serious injury. Emma was running across the field, when suddenly, she dropped to the ground writhing in pain. The

³⁰⁴ Ibid.

³⁰⁵ Fleck, *Genesis and Development*, 39.

coaches went to her to assess the injury as the rest of the team formed a circle on the field, praying for her. The coaches walked her over to the bench where I was sitting with the assistant coach, Liz. They gave her ice for her hamstring, and Liz asked about the injury. Emma's first response was, "This is the worst it's ever been. I really feel like God doesn't want me playing. I feel like He wants me here, but every time I play, it's something."³⁰⁶ Generally, injuries and hardships were understood as God asserting His will, trying to communicate something to believers. The women on the team would pray aloud, saying, "God, help us with our injuries and struggles," and in the same breath say, "We know everything from you is in love," and they would see no contradiction. Injuries and hardships were fully integrated with the thought style and, instead of undermining God's love, injuries were seen as evidence of God's continued involvement in the lives of the players.

Sports ministry, as a wider community, and the Lady Eagles, as a specific community, interpreted their sporting experiences through the lens of divine power. This power was described multiple times by team authorities and was also referenced in the 2008 team theme, "Power Within." Every season, the team chooses a theme Bible verse and uses this verse in multiple contexts. For 2008, the verse was II Corinthians 4:7, "But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us."³⁰⁷ On the cover of the workbooks distributed to each player, this verse was accompanied by a photograph of cracked clay jars. The thought collective interpreted this verse as: humans are like jars of clay, worth very little, but within these

³⁰⁶ Fieldnotes by author, 7 May 2008, Charlotte, N.C.

³⁰⁷ II Corinthians 4:7 (New International Version)

jars lies the power of God, and it is this power that allows humans to do things that influence others. The verse, and the meaning attached to it, formed the basis for numerous lessons for the team; it was invoked at pre-practice devotionals, during sports ministry training, in small group settings, pre-game chapels, and team retreats. In this way, II Corinthians 4:7 served as an internal link between multiple messages. The meaning attached to the verse formed a key thread weaving through all of the team's religious and athletic practices.

For example, at the team retreat, the team divided into groups of four or five to create performances that demonstrated the theme verse. This involved about twenty minutes of discussing how the verse should be communicated (verbally, through gesture, in song) followed by each group's performance. There were five groups, so in addition to working out the meaning and communication of the verse in their small group, the players observed four other renditions of the verse. Tara's group performed the verse as a rap using the tune from the theme song of *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*. "Well, this is the story all about how my life got twist-turned upside down. I'd like to take a minute, just sit right there, tell you how I learned about these treasures in jars of clay..." Another group used their bodies to form a jar of clay and had one group member in the middle striking strongman poses to demonstrate power within. All in all, the team spent almost an hour discussing, performing, and watching versions of II Corinthians 4:7.

At the conclusion of this activity, Steph, a team captain, led a lesson, beginning with a prayer for knowledge. "Lord, every time we open your word, show us what's true in the world, so that we will be able to tell what's true and what's not true, so that we will

be able to follow what's true and what is from you..."³⁰⁸ Aligning this prayer for truth with the team's investigation of II Corinthians 4:7 reinforced that the content of the verse—the players are jars of clay with God's power within—was meant to be understood as legitimate knowledge, distinguished from false knowledge that does not come from the Bible. Steph's lesson focused on using God's power within to change one's desires. "Whatever it is that you struggle with, whatever desire you have that maybe doesn't make God smile, God really does change it when you ask Him to. And that's the love that we can't understand."³⁰⁹ The idea of change stemming from God's power reinforced the idea of the theme verse, and the more times this verse was referenced, the more incontrovertible it seemed.

The conflation of biblical authority, Steph's athletic authority, and the repetition of II Corinthians 4:7 secured the team's knowledge of God's power. The women playing for the Charlotte Lady Eagles were soccer experts and were fully aware of what athletes go through to become experts in their sport. They practice. They practice often. Strikingly, soccer practice for the team was arranged in much the same format as sports ministry training. There was an expert (the coach) who introduces an exercise—usually a drill that emphasizes one skill important for soccer success (passing, running, shooting). Then the team divided into small groups to work on this skill. Sometimes, when the exercise was introduced, the coach used a few players to model the exercise for the group. These players were often veteran players or starters, reinforcing a hierarchical system of authority where certain players were credited with more expertise than others.

³⁰⁸ Fieldnotes by author, 17 May 2008, Charlotte, N.C.

³⁰⁹ Ibid.

Notably, these same model players were understood to be models of Christian faith, linking these two fields of expertise. After a series of drills and exercises, soccer practice culminated in a game-like simulation. This was an opportunity for players to combine the skills they had been practicing. The opportunity to combine skills learned at sports ministry training also arose in game situations. Players discussed and practiced team encouragement, proper on-field behavior, and obedience to experts (coaches, captains, veterans, starters, and goalkeepers). They then enacted these skills on the field. Because game situations combined skills from sports ministry training and soccer practice, players experienced athletic and evangelistic training as related and mutually constitutive.

This strategy was predominant for all of sports ministry training including lessons on how to communicate religious knowledge to others. The Charlotte Lady Eagles were taught to justify their beliefs with Bible verses, to formulate their own testimony, and to understand their sporting identity as an extension of their Christian identity. One of the most important components of evangelical training was communicating the Gospel message to others. This was called, “telling your story.” A believer’s story is a narrative that tells of life before converting to Christianity, the experience of accepting Jesus, and what life was like after. Within the context of the Lady Eagles, it was fully appropriate for one player to ask another, “How did you come to know the Lord?” In fact, this was used as an icebreaker between players getting to know each other.³¹⁰

Telling one’s testimony is a learned and constructed activity that follows particular rules. Amanda, a veteran player recognized for her “gift of evangelism,”³¹¹ led

³¹⁰ Fieldnotes by author, 17 May 2008, Charlotte, N.C.

³¹¹ Fieldnotes by author, 14 May 2008, Charlotte, N.C.

sports ministry training on how to construct a testimony. She defined testimony as “how the Gospel changed your life.” She then asked the team to brainstorm in small groups about other definitions of “testimony.” Katelyn said, “It’s obviously about how God worked in your life, and it’s to give Him glory for how He’s changed you.” This explanation points to the centrality of change within the narrative and the speaker’s obligation to convey the importance of God’s role in this change.

Amanda then defined a courtroom testimony as “a statement by a witness to prove that something is true.” She said, “We use our testimony to prove that Christ is true.” She drew a large V on the board and labeled the far left side with her birth date, the bottom of the V with “90 years” and left the right side blank. According to Amanda, the V represented a timeline of a person’s life extended beyond death. She said to the group, “Somewhere on there, you made a decision to walk with Christ. Draw a line and put a dot there. If you haven’t made that decision, use today’s date. If you’re not sure, we can make that official today, if you want... When you understand what happened to you before you accepted Christ, you can make it tangible to the Gospel.” By this, Amanda meant that believers must recognize the changes in their lives following their acceptance of Jesus. These changes then become evidence of God’s involvement in their lives.

The players were given a handout entitled “My Story.” It was divided into three sections that the players were meant to fill in: “Before Jesus,” “The Transition,” and “With Jesus.” Players were encouraged to understand their lives according to this format. Amanda concluded her lesson by telling the group:

We’re always going to be attacked by Satan. As life continues and you move to a new place—for example, graduating college—and you look back on your awesome years as a college athlete, now is a time of seeking. Having Christ will give you that path. You do have a testimony, but you will continue to have

testimonies. We have to incorporate the Gospel in order to evangelize. It's important to understand the Gospel in its fullness in order to create your testimony.³¹²

For evangelical Christians like Amanda, the Gospel is the single most important piece of information in the Christian faith. Sincere belief in the Gospel is credited with the ability to change people, and those that were granted the most authority in the Lady Eagles' community were those most practiced at delivering the Gospel message and chronicling changes in their own lives. Learning evangelism was central for the Lady Eagles as evidenced by the large amount of time and energy dedicated to constructing one's own testimony and being able to speak about and demonstrate one's faith to others.

In addition to developing one's testimony, prayer was encouraged as a communication practice within the group. A day or two before a game, slips of paper containing names of players on the opposing team were distributed so that the Lady Eagles could pray for that player individually. Prayers for players on opposing teams generally focused on keeping that player safe from injury and hoping that the player would commit to Christianity. In this way, prayer was presented as a team obligation and an important practice that could have real effects in the lives of others. Besides individual prayer, a major means of communicating within the Charlotte Lady Eagles was group prayer. The team prayed together before and after practice, before and after games, before and after sports ministry training—basically, to open and close every group event. Group prayer was an important exercise because one person speaks for the group, voicing community concerns and joys. The role of prayer-speaker was not predetermined and any member of the group could volunteer to pray, reinforcing

³¹² Fieldnotes by author, 13 May 2008, Charlotte, N.C.

community connectivity. However, most often, the players that would volunteer to pray for the group were veteran players, team captains, or starters—the same persons granted both athletic and religious expertise within the thought collective.

Before prayer would begin, players would contribute prayer requests, generally for people experiencing health or family difficulties. Prayer was highly formulaic, generally beginning with an exaltation of God (“Dear Lord” or “Heavenly Father”), then an expression of gratitude (“Thank you for bringing us all here together,” or “Thank you for the opportunity to worship you.”), then a request for help (“Please be with those who are injured” or “Please help us to remember not to be prideful.”). And, prayer was always closed the same way: the speaker would say, “in Jesus’ name we pray,” and everyone would respond, “Amen.”

Vocalized prayer accomplished two important things for the team. First, it united them physically as they stood with their arms around each other. Second, it united them in a common voice as they trusted one person to speak for the group. When group prayer was used after a game, the opposing team was invited to pray with the Eagles. At nearly every home game, a majority of players on the opposing team would join the prayer circle on the field. Liz said that at an away game the entire opposing team prayed with them. “Usually, it’ll be a few girls that join us, but it was the whole team and that was really nice. I mean, some of these girls might never have heard someone pray out loud for them before and that can be a powerful experience. Because when someone prays for you out loud, you hear how much they care about you.”³¹³ Vocalized prayer demonstrates one of the key goals of the Eagles, to communicate emotional investment in

³¹³ Fieldnotes by author, 13 May 2008, Charlotte, N.C.

others as evidence of God's emotional investment in humans. The team was taught, "Belonging precedes believing."³¹⁴ In trying to convince others of the importance of a heartfelt belief in Jesus Christ, the team integrated outsiders into their practices. They linked arms or held hands with players on the opposing team during the post-game prayer circles, physically joining the other team with their community.

Before or after practice, a player or a coach would lead the team in a devotional, sharing Bible verses and lessons that they developed themselves. Liz led a devotional on the question, "What does it mean to pray in Jesus' name?" She said:

I don't think that God wants us to take anything for granted, even something as little or as big as how we finish our prayers.... As you guys are studying and looking, and this is homework—Jesus' name means 'He saves.' The names in the Bible all mean something, they show the essence or the character of a person. That name wasn't a mistake. He was named that on purpose. Everything has significance in God's word.... Jesus is fully human and fully God. He was fully without sin. He died everyday to his own will in perfect surrenderance to God's will. He was omniscient and omnipotent, yet he surrenders to God.... To say, 'in Jesus' name,' we are taking on the character of Jesus.³¹⁵

The head coach talked about his experience coaching at a secular high school. He said that he had been asked to leave Jesus' name out of his prayers. "What separates our faith from any other faith is Jesus. I have been asked to not pray in Jesus' name. I know that God hears it anyway, but I do not like it. Boy, is there an empty feeling when I can't say 'in Jesus' name.' And when I am in an environment where I can say it, there is power there."³¹⁶ There was more attention to prayer closings after that, "in Jesus' name" delivered with emotion, rather than as a standardized phrase.

³¹⁴ Fieldnotes by author, 11 May 2008, Charlotte, N.C.

³¹⁵ Fieldnotes by author, 5 June 2008, Charlotte, N.C.

³¹⁶ Ibid.

Additionally, players would discuss the content of their prayers with each other and request players to pray for them. For example, one player, Jennie, had been dating a Catholic man who was deciding whether or not to join the priesthood. She said, “I’ve just been in prayer so much about it and I know that God has a perfect plan, and if he goes into the priesthood, then God will put someone else in my life.”³¹⁷ Jennie prayed for God to show His will in her life and to help her see the appropriate course of action. She knew that she wanted to keep dating her boyfriend, but she prayed for guidance rather than for her desires. Over the course of the season, her boyfriend decided not to join the priesthood and to pursue a life with Jennie. When Jennie told her teammates about her boyfriend’s decision, she thanked everyone for their prayers and credited his decision to the constant praying over it. One player responded to her news, “Now you know that God won’t put on your heart something that’s not on his heart, too.”³¹⁸ Jennie and her teammates credited God’s power and the power of prayer for bringing Jennie and her boyfriend together.

However, there were also instances when players were disappointed with the outcome of prayers. Early in the season, Amanda announced that she was pregnant. She and her husband already had one child and were not expecting another so soon, but excitedly accepted the news as God’s will. A few weeks later, Amanda missed a few practices and asked the team to pray for her. “Amanda couldn’t make it today. She has a doctor’s appointment and asked us to pray that everything is alright.”³¹⁹ Amanda came to

³¹⁷ Fieldnotes by author, 12 May 2008, Charlotte, N.C.

³¹⁸ Fieldnotes by author, 19 May 2008, Charlotte, N.C.

³¹⁹ Fieldnotes by author, 11 June 2008, Charlotte, N.C.

practice that afternoon with the news that she had lost the baby. She said, “Well, God did it...” but she didn’t have much to say to the team about the miscarriage and seemed downtrodden.³²⁰ This event demonstrates that, for some evangelical Christians, prayers are not always linked to outcomes. Even though the team prayed for her pregnancy, she lost the baby. Yet, she still understood her miscarriage as part of God’s plan, demonstrating the ability of the evangelical thought style to smooth over contradiction and adapt seemingly contrary events to previously held beliefs.

The Charlotte Lady Eagles demonstrated a developed and detailed thought style. Small differences of opinion existed, but these differences were carefully examined by the thought collective and integrated into the thought style. Because one of the key missions of the team was to demonstrate difference from the larger sporting world, differences of opinion most often arose over the most appropriate way to accomplish this. For example, one session of sports ministry training was dedicated to gamesmanship, the practice of using the rules to gain an unfair advantage over your opponent. In soccer, gamesmanship is fairly common and is often accepted as part of the game. Examples of gamesmanship include stalling by taking a long time to throw in a ball, remaining on the ground longer than necessary after a fall, or taking one’s position at a slow pace. The Lady Eagles prided themselves on being different from the majority of soccer teams and on being able to demonstrate that difference on the field, not just in their pre- and post-game rituals. However, all of the players had previously played on teams where gamesmanship was expected, and they expected it from other teams. Cultural studies scholar Brian Massumi has noted that gamesmanship is not only a common practice in

³²⁰ Ibid.

soccer, but it is the skilled use of gamesmanship that creates a soccer star. “The star plays against the rules but not by breaking them. He plays around them, adding minute, unregulated contingencies to the charged mix. She adds free variations: ‘free’ in the sense that they are... unsubsumed by the rules of game.”³²¹ The Lady Eagles wanted to stand out from the larger soccer community because of their skill, but gamesmanship, though generally accepted and even promoted in soccer generally, was not how they wanted to be identified.

One point of contention within the Lady Eagles’ community was how to know when to use common practices that might be considered gamesmanship and when to avoid these practices even if it meant giving the other team the advantage. For example, taking the ball to the corner is a stalling practice. It is not against the rules, but it is frustrating for the defenders. Tara’s boyfriend, a soccer player on a secular team and a former Eagles player spoke up. Everyone turned, and noticing the attention, he laughed and said, “Okay, I’ll tell you the answer.” The group laughed, but Tara’s boyfriend was granted a measure of authority on the topic. He said, “I’ll tell you one thing, as a forward, I would take it to the corner every time. But, as a defender, I get so mad at that player.”

Another player responded, “Maybe we shouldn’t keep the ball in the corner. Maybe we should trust God to bless that and not let them score. We can be a witness because of that.”

³²¹ Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2002), 77.

Tara agreed. “There are aspects of gamesmanship that are geared at getting an unfair advantage. We can play teams fair and win. This is a stepping-off point for us to be different.”

Her boyfriend told the group, “It’s part of the Eagles’ organization to try to be different. If you do something that might be weird to them [the other team], then they’re gonna start asking questions about why the Eagles do the things that they do. And the answer is that we’re trying to be like Christ. If the ball goes out of bounds, you pick it up and hand it to the player [instead of waiting for the other player to go and get it]. And, yeah, it’s more work. And, that’s part of being on this team, doing the extra work.”³²²

The Eagles believe that playing soccer could be effective evangelism. However, this involved two somewhat contradictory impulses; playing fair and winning. As winners, they were able to draw a larger audience and have a greater platform for their message. However, if they won by not playing fair, then their message would lack validity.

After a long discussion, the team agreed that intention matters as much as action. The sports ministry training leader said:

Anger is as bad as murder to God. Lust is as bad as adultery. There are rules, but it’s what’s in your heart and mind that Jesus sees and that can be judged. We can take this one step further. Jesus is looking at the hearts of men. This parallels the game with the rules that are in place. Yeah, we’re not breaking the rules, but we can go further. These little things have an effect on how we’re seen. You can trust that God will provide you with integrity if you take this a step further. It comes down to what’s in your heart.³²³

³²² Fieldnotes by author, 3 June 2008, Charlotte, N.C.

³²³ Ibid.

A 6'2" forward responded, "So, a lot of times, I'll be the biggest player on the field." Everyone laughed. "Okay, most all of the time," she conceded. "So, on my college team, I'll get told to go in and commit a foul. But, I always play to the ball. If I go in and get a yellow card, it was still my intention to win the ball." Generally, the team agreed that was the best practice. Liz, the assistant coach, said, "If your intention is to win the ball—Fouls will be called, but it's your intention that matters."³²⁴

This stance on intention proved troublesome in discussions of portraying distinction. Intentions are invisible, and the team relied on measurable practices to display difference to their opponents and their audience. This tension was evident in a discussion of how to receive praise. Liz asked, "How do you respond to praise from others?"

Jennie said, "I've come to the point where I say thank you, and then I say, it wasn't me, it was God. I'm gonna add God in there."

Ellie, the starting goalkeeper, responded, "I would say thank you and then praise God myself, because it would freak my teammates out if I was like, it wasn't me, it was God."

"It's different if you say it's from God."

"Yeah, but are you supposed to do that every time? Like instead of saying 'good game, good game,' say, 'it was God, it was God'?" asked Ellie. Everyone laughed.

Another player responded, "Receiving praise is a delicate balance of knowing that it's not all you. It's okay to be thankful that God used me."³²⁵

³²⁴ Ibid.

³²⁵ Fieldnotes by author, 21 May 2008, Charlotte, N.C.

Discussions of gamesmanship and receiving praise demonstrated that ideas within the thought collective were fully explored and then integrated into the thought style. Players employed shared knowledge to address questionable practices and to find a way to understand these practices in light of their thought style. In their approach to these issues, the Lady Eagles relied on the parts of their thought style that they believed distinguished them from secular soccer teams. They saw avoiding gamesmanship as a method of demonstrating both Christ's power and their own distinction as a Christian team. They saw voicing thanks to God in the context of receiving a compliment as a way to bring attention to Christianity and emphasize the evangelical mission of the team.

Distinction was linked to biblical authority. The use of the Bible was understood as a distinctive practice unique to Christian teams, and the Bible itself was distinguished from secular textual authorities. Each lesson for sports ministry would begin by thinking together about the definition of the lesson title; encouragement, motivation, pride, etc. After discussing this in small groups, the players would share the definitions they came up with, and then the sports ministry trainer would read the definition from the dictionary. This happened so frequently that it even became a joke. For example, after sharing definitions of "pride" like "thinking of yourself first" and "a reliance on oneself for strength," Steph said, "You're all wrong. According to the dictionary, pride is a group of lions." After the laughter subsided, she delivered the dictionary definition that was expected, "Pride is satisfaction derived from achievements, qualities, or possessions."³²⁶

³²⁶ Ibid.

After stating the dictionary definition, sports ministry trainers would then walk through a Christian definition of the same term, using the Bible as the key authority. Pointing to verses that addressed the topic, the lesson leader would request these verses be read aloud and discussed by the group. One reason that the dictionary and the Bible emerged as key references in sports ministry training was that the dictionary was seen as a secular resource. Sports ministry training could then compare secular definitions of key ideas to Christian understandings of the same ideas. This exercise in comparison served to separate evangelical Christians from secular society by emphasizing that Christianity involved understanding the same things differently.

Sports were seen as a primarily secular enterprise, so combining sports and Christianity required work on the part of the believer. Steph said, “Sport is about worldly recognition and glory for the self. If you aren’t balanced, then you start to seek those things.”³²⁷ She implied that this balance could be achieved through using both worldly sources of authority, like the dictionary, and Christian sources of authority, like the Bible. Sources of secular authority were juxtaposed with sources of religious authority, strengthening the notion of distinctive value attached to Christian ways of knowing.

Throughout this chapter, I have explored how one particular evangelical athletic thought collective integrated new members by reproducing a system of knowledge that overtly combined sport and Christianity. In this training of new members, all participants in the thought collective were taught to use sport and Christianity as complementary forms of knowledge that could and should be combined. While this same lesson was conveyed at FCA summer camp through the language of spiritual warfare (as noted in

³²⁷ Ibid.

chapter four), in the Charlotte Lady Eagles' community the combination of sport and Christianity was framed less in terms of battle and more as an individual and collective obligation to stand apart from secular systems of knowledge and secular sports teams. Since the Charlotte Lady Eagles were together for an entire season instead of a five-day summer camp and were comfortable identifying as elite athletes rather than as high school athletes who may or may not play in college, they produced a more complex and nuanced knowledge system. As explored in chapter six, this sort of knowledge system holds because Christian athletes are able to use their own bodies and athletic experiences to confirm their beliefs. As such, Christian athletic knowledge can be understood as an embodied certainty, collectively maintained through the active production of discursive structures that solidify and protect the thought style through resonance with existing and accepted sporting and evangelical epistemologies. This production of resonance can help explain the expansive growth of sports ministry. Sports ministry makes sense—it produces cultural acceptance by actively relying on accepted knowledge (of authority, of hierarchy, of gender, and of athletics) to interpret the lived experiences of Christian athletes. Sports ministry functions as an affirmation of evangelical beliefs.

CHAPTER 8

Conclusions: Intimate Knowledge

I sat between the two Brazilian players on a bench around the campfire at the Charlotte Lady Eagles' team retreat. Tara was playing the guitar, leading us in praise and worship songs. Lindi turned to me and said, "I love to sing. I mean, I love to pray and I love worship, but when I sing..." She gestured with her hands toward the sky with a big smile on her face. I had spent a good deal of time with Lindi and because English was not her first language, she relied heavily on gestures and facial expressions to convey meaning. Perhaps it was because I was accustomed to filling in the blanks when talking to Lindi or perhaps it was because I also love to sing, but that gesture skyward made sense to me. She seemed to mean that singing as a group, the connection between her and her teammates raising their voices in unison, made her feel closer to God. I squeezed her shoulder saying, "I know what you mean," and we turned to join the next song.³²⁸

It took me more than a year of spending time with Christian athletes to be able to say "I know what you mean." Though I remained unconverted, it was easier and easier to travel across the thin membrane between belief and disbelief, to inhabit both perspectives. Indeed, I felt compelled to do so in order to take seriously the claims of the

³²⁸ Fieldnotes by author, 17 May 2008, Charlotte, N.C.

Christian athletes I met.³²⁹ By immersing myself in their belief structures, I felt closer to understanding how athletics could be a religious experience. As the singing ended, M.J. stood to address the group. The firelight lent a somber dimension to M.J. who was normally full of friendly sarcasm. She was holding a small book open in one hand, but began not with a Bible verse, but with a story:

Some of you know that I've been going through a rough time. On the way to the campfire tonight, I really had to pee, but I didn't want to be late, and somebody said to me, "M.J., you just spent two months in Ethiopia. Just go pee in the woods." And I thought to myself, "Yeah, I'm really good at peeing in the bush. I'll just go in the woods." And of course, I peed all over my leg and had to go back to the cabin and change and I missed all the singing. And that's kind of how I feel right now—can't even pee right.³³⁰

There was laughter, but it was clear that this anecdote was going to lead to a serious story.

My father is in jail right now. There have been some troubles in my family. My father was the pastor of our church, and he was caught having affairs with a number of women. I'm not sure what to think about this. The scandal was huge and my whole family is embarrassed and ashamed.³³¹

M.J. continued to tell her story to the group and confessed questioning her faith. She did not conclude as would be expected by reconfirming her faith through prayer or faithful friends. She left it open-ended. After her talk, M.J. asked if anyone else wanted to share. Everyone was silent.

³²⁹ Susan Harding has argued that it is in crossing this membrane that ethnographic knowledge is made. Susan Friend Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000).

³³⁰ Fieldnotes by author, 17 May 2008, Charlotte, N.C.

³³¹ Ibid.

Around the campfire, the atmosphere was expectant. It reminded me of an altar call; it seemed like everyone was waiting for something big to happen. After several minutes of silence, Amy spoke up.

Last year, when I joined this team, I expected to hate it and to hate everyone here. I just wanted to play soccer and I thought Christians were pushy and close-minded. I didn't even have a Bible, that's how clueless I was. I walked around everyday waiting for them to condemn me. I was defensive and guarded, because I felt like I was masquerading and that any day someone was going to call me out on it and condemn me. Then, last year, at team retreat, I couldn't handle it anymore. I broke down and confessed all of this sin that I had been carrying. When I got married, I was three months pregnant with Allie. I mean, that's a really evident sin. But no one judged me or condemned me. And... I got saved last year here at team retreat. So, if you are carrying anything, you should know that this is a safe place and that you can trust us.³³²

More silence.

Players glanced at each other or stared into the fire, but no one volunteered to speak. I got the feeling that new players were expected to contribute at this moment, but the silence stretched on. Eventually, Steph asked if the new players could share their testimony as a way for everyone to get to know each other. One new player broke the ice, and as time passed, a few more new players spoke up, sharing struggles with being far from their family and loved ones for the summer. Something seemed lacking. There was no climactic release like Amy described or that M.J. had prepared us for.

At first, I thought of the fireside episode as a failure, as a failed altar call. I thought back to my experience with the Power Team and what might be considered a successful altar call given the large numbers of commitments. However, there were important differences between these two events. M.J.'s fireside story struck me as genuine and important. I trusted her account of herself. Whereas, when I sat in the

³³² Ibid.

audience of New Hope Baptist Church listening to Bear's account of marrying the blonde that brought him to church, I was wholly skeptical of his veracity and of the intended effects of his narrative. It seemed to me that he could not be trusted to tell his story honestly given the spectacular context and the ensuing altar call. Bear and M.J.'s stories were both told in a consciously-constructed, emotion-laden setting intended to produce religious commitments. While I had immediately dismissed Bear as a slick evangelist and questioned the authenticity of the commitments that followed, I felt myself resonating with M.J.'s story and anticipating the confessions and commitments that were bound to follow. I think I was as disappointed as any other person gathered around that fire that no one converted or expressly recommitted that night. As an unconverted outsider, it was strange to feel that desire and disappointment. I had no desire to convert myself, but I had wanted to see it happen. In the year and a half since I had hid behind my notebook in the Power Team audience, I had moved from the dismissal of spectacle to sympathy for the intimate knowledge of the divine that M.J. and others used to understand their lives. I still saw the function of sports ministry as affirmation for the saved, but I came to understand this affirmation not as an affirmation of power, but as an affirmation of vulnerability. The Lady Eagles around the fire that night were not relishing in the strength of M.J. or Amy; they were relishing in their vulnerability and in their openness to divine intimacy.

Over the course of my time with the Lady Eagles, I participated in a small group devotional with M.J., Amy, and a few others, and M.J. and I became friends. We spent time together outside of the Eagles' events. I went to church with her and her roommate and would join them for glasses of wine on the porch of their house. On my birthday, she

arranged an announcement on the loudspeaker: “A special happy birthday to Annie bah-bah-bah-BLAZER!— resident anthropologist for the Charlotte Lady Eagles. Thank you for bringing us a little bit of culture everyday.”³³³ She was a thoughtful friend.

She was also a thoughtful investigator of religion. Her family experiences had led her to deeply question the value and effects of Christianity, and she emerged from this struggle with a sense of intimacy with the divine. During one small group meeting, she explained:

I had been bathed in the knowledge of the Gospel since I was born, but it wasn’t until I took the Gospel inside of me, that I was changed. Everything about me changed from the inside out, instead of wearing the Gospel like a veneer over my life. *Knowing* the Gospel isn’t only about head-knowledge, knowing *about* it. It is an intimate feeling of internalizing God’s love, knowing it in the biblical sense.³³⁴

M.J. compared knowledge of the Gospel to sexual knowledge of a lover. As I have argued in this dissertation, Christian athletes rely on physical sensations to recognize God’s power and pleasure. M.J.’s description of intimacy mirrors the sexual subtext of Wes Neal’s description of Christ-likeness as a “Total Release Performance.” Language of intimacy conveyed closeness to God and oneness with Christ. Knowing something with your body leads to a certainty that it is difficult to describe, and intimacy was a way to access this knowledge and describe these sensations to others.

Embodied certainty acquired through intimate knowledge of the divine can function to affirm God’s power and God’s pleasure. Sport lends itself to using physical sensation to create meaning because athletes are well versed in both muscle memory and

³³³ Fieldnotes by author, 14 June 2008, Charlotte, N.C.

³³⁴ Fieldnotes by author, 10 June 2008, Charlotte, N.C.

mental conditioning. Because sport and evangelical Christianity resonate with each other on multiple levels, sport can function to affirm evangelical understandings of both social and divine relationships. In this conclusion, I summarize three major themes of this dissertation—individual religious experience, competing discourses, and the construction of knowledge—in order to show how sports ministry serves to confirm religious understandings.

From Celebrity Evangelism to Individual Religious Experience

Wes Neal is perhaps the most indicative character in the story of sport ministry's elevation of individual religious experience. As chronicled in chapter three, Neal was a weightlifter who traveled with Athletes in Action's weightlifting team in the late 1960s. He and his fellow weightlifters demonstrated their physical strength as a way to gain an audience for a gospel message. This celebrity evangelism strategy was fairly successful, but Neal found it unsatisfying. He wanted to be able to "lift weights God's way," instead of using celebrity recognition to evangelize. According to Neal, "My team and I began to think about how to lift weights God's way. We turned to the motto of Campus Crusade, which is 'Witness in the Holy Spirit and leave the results to God.' But that didn't help us much because we still didn't know how to lift weights in the power of the Holy Spirit."³³⁵

Neal sought to re-imagine Christian athletics on an individual level, examining how an athlete might understand an athletic performance as a praise and worship experience. He came to the conclusion that athletic worship experiences were largely

³³⁵ Interview by author, telephone, 20 September 2008.

mental: “The mind is a meeting ground with God.”³³⁶ By intentionally concentrating on God, Neal believed that athletes could physically affiliate themselves with Christ. He compared intense dedication to one’s athletic performance, especially pushing through athletic pain, to Christ’s crucifixion and presented this as pleasurable to God.

Neal’s work coincided with a critique of celebrity evangelism leveled from both inside and outside sports ministry. Gary Warner, editor of FCA’s member publication *The Christian Athlete*, began to openly criticize Christian involvement in sport noting a lack of ethical evaluation of competition and the sporting industry. From outside sports ministry, *Sports Illustrated* writer Frank Deford leveled a scathing critique against what he called “Sportianity.” He wrote, “To put it bluntly, athletes are being used to sell religion. They endorse Jesus, much as they would a new sneaker or a graphite-shafted driver.”³³⁷ In the 1970s when both these critiques appeared, reevaluations of sport from an ethical perspective were increasingly common. Christian athletic celebrities were easy targets as it was assumed that Christian commitments would entail a moral obligation to improve sport. Yet, as Deford noted, “Sportianity does not question the casual brutality [of sports]... It does not censure the intemperate behavior of coaches... The fear of taking a stand on moral issues is acute.”³³⁸

³³⁶ Interview by author, telephone, 30 September 2008.

³³⁷ Frank Deford, “The Word According to Tom,” *Sports Illustrated*, 26 April 1976, 55.

³³⁸ Ibid., 65. This sentiment continues to appear in critiques of Christian athletic celebrities today. According to historian William Baker, “Gone, in the evangelical equation, are older concerns about the relation of sports to physical health or the moral lessons to be gained from athletic competition.” William Baker, *Playing With God: Religion and Modern Sport* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), 217. However, my research shows that this critique does not hold against those who are

Perhaps due to this rising resentment of Christian athletic celebrities, Neal's work gained quick acceptance in the field of sports ministry. His training texts were released in multiple editions and continue to form the basis for much of sports ministry training today. Though Christian athletic celebrities still enjoy much attention within sports ministry, the primary focus in training Christian athletes is now on embodied religious experience. This shift opened sports ministry participation to athletes with little celebrity potential, like youth and female athletes. As explored in chapter four, women now constitute a majority in most sports ministry organizations.

Contrary and Complementary Narratives: Spiritual Warfare and Christ-likeness

Sports ministry is a social institution; it exists as a site of interaction between people. Because of its social character, the discourses used to frame sports ministry deserve attention. In particular, I have focused on the discourses of spiritual warfare and becoming Christ-like. "Discourse" is a Foucauldian term that consciously recognizes internal tensions and contradictions in the construction of ideas and practices. According to Foucault, "It is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined together. And for this reason, we must conceive discourse as a series of discontinuous segments whose tactical function is neither uniform nor stable."³³⁹ In Foucault's work, discourse is a tool that can be mobilized in multiple ways. He noted that within and between discourses, there exist significant contradictions and manipulations that arise from a similar overall

interested in exploring athletics as religious experience rather than solely as a means to evangelize.

³³⁹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 100.

strategy. In the case of sports ministry, the overall strategy of using athletics as religious experience gives rise to discourses of spiritual warfare and Christ-likeness that confirm athletic access to God while presenting contradictory understandings of human agency.

In chapter five, I investigated how the discourse of spiritual warfare served to elevate the importance of athletics in a religious worldview and how that discourse occurred in the context of larger political representations of the war on terror. At 2007's FCA camp, the war on terror and spiritual warfare mutually reinforced each other because they both relied on the presence of an unseen and determined enemy. Spiritual warfare was used to explain every facet of Christian athletic experience, from exhaustion to joy to injury. Every event was presented as a dualistic struggle between God and Satan played out through the body of the athlete. While this presentation elevated the importance of athletic activity, it also eclipsed individual agency by emphasizing a scenario where God and Satan are the primary actors.

This understanding of the athlete as a pawn in a larger war contradicted a second prevalent discourse in sports ministry—Christ-likeness. As noted in chapter six, Christ-likeness was understood as a dynamic process that athletes could access through sport. In this scenario, the athlete was the primary agent as she makes decisions and performs actions perceived as close to Christ. The same sensations that were attributed to spiritual warfare—pain, pleasure, suffering, and exhaustion—were also used to understand a state of Christ-likeness. Rather than a war that buffets the athlete between these sensations, athletes narrated Christ-likeness as an intentional performance. For example, the women on AIA's traveling basketball team sought to behave in ways that reflected evidence of proximity to Christ. This was not a simple endeavor. As the team discipler said, "I don't

want to say that God is complicated, but He is not as cut and dry as I expect.”³⁴⁰ Christ-likeness in the context of basketball forced the coaches and players to imagine behaviors that Jesus would never have encountered—how to react to referees, to tension with coaches, to injuries, to teammates who understood Christ-likeness differently. It made for a complicated negotiation of identity, but as I show in the chapter, those that experienced moments that they understood as becoming Christ-like were able to achieve a powerful sense of validity of their faith.

Though I addressed these discourses in separate chapters, spiritual warfare and Christ-likeness are not as distinct as this separation may imply. A Christian athlete may move easily between the two discourses because they share the common feature of presenting athletics as religious experience. The underlying presence of both these systems is that sport can and should be used as a Christian avenue to experience God’s power and pleasure.

Sporting and Evangelical Knowledge

Sport may be an environment particularly conducive for affirming of God’s power and pleasure because of the ways that the epistemological system of sport parallels the logic of evangelical Christianity. I addressed resonant understandings of gender in chapter four in my investigation of the rise of female athletic participation in sports ministry. As noted, both sports and evangelical Christianity present gender as an important index of ability and worth. Because female athletes must consistently carve out a space for women in the male-dominated sporting world and because evangelicals

³⁴⁰ Fieldnotes by author, 2 November 2007, Amherst, Mass.

use gender as an organizational principle for human interaction, female Christian athletes experience an important tension between their desire to fulfill their gender obligations according to their religion and their desire to excel in sport. Sports ministry developed tools for dealing with this tension, encouraging female athletes to see embracing femininity as a means to reach their full athletic potential.

Female athletes have become increasingly acceptable, even encouraged, in American culture, but their success is contingent upon their continual demonstration that that athletic success does not entail sexual deviance. Even the appearance of sexual deviance can prove devastating for a female athlete's career. Evangelical Christianity's emphasis on gender roles and femininity can offset assumptions about sexual deviance and function to affirm for both athletes and observers that participants are "normal."

I used the example of the Charlotte Lady Eagles in chapter seven to argue that Christian athletic organizations use the structures of sport to confirm their knowledge of Christianity. In particular, the team used understandings of authority, communication, and group distinction. The Charlotte Lady Eagles practiced soccer, but they also practiced Christianity. Sports ministry training for this group focused on setting the Eagles apart from secular soccer teams by emphasizing the authority of the Bible, the importance of prayer, and demonstrable on-field differences. They employed the language of Christ-likeness to understand their developments as Christian athletes. And, like some AIA players, they narrated a growing toward Christ-likeness as an internal change that served to reinforce their religious knowledge. Authority on Christ-likeness and authority on soccer were aligned as team captains and veteran players were positioned as experts on both. This epistemological resonance conflated athletic and

Christian knowledge, making knowledge of Christianity concrete through its enactment on the playing field.

Intimate Knowledge

From altar calls at FCA camp to playing through exhaustion on the basketball court to solidifying a team through the use of group prayer, the Christian athletic groups I observed consistently combined physical and religious experiences. As such, they developed an embodied knowledge and physical certainty of religious teachings. Sensations of athletic pleasure and athletic pain were narrated as moments of closeness to God, and therefore those athletic moments took on increased importance—every kick, every shot, every lift, every sprint was framed as a potential site to connect with God and to *know* God. AIA’s team trainer described this process, “You think, hmmm, makes sense up here [points to head], but it’s hard to get it to sink in, down to your heart.”³⁴¹ For her and for many Christian athletes, heart knowledge as opposed to head knowledge, embodied physical understanding rather than mental processes, was the core of Christian athletic experience.

As athletes, sports ministry participants are trained in bodily awareness, and they work to use this awareness to understand what it means to be a Christian. This understanding changed over time, shifting from celebrity evangelism to internalized religious experience as the ground for intimate knowledge of God’s love and power. Christian athletic training did not undermine the sporting industry, but instead used sport as a confirmation of Christian beliefs. The embodied practices of athleticism allowed an

³⁴¹ Fieldnotes by author, 1 November 2007, Boston, Mass.

intimate knowledge of Christianity, a physically affirming certainty that has made Christian athleticism an important and growing site of contemporary religious experience. Recognizing that sport can play this role in religious life allows us to see religion as intertwined with other forms of cultural knowledge.

The connections between evangelical Christianity and sport are numerous, and Christian athletes employ these connections to affirm religious teachings. They actively combine their Christian and athletic experiences, interpreting embodied sensations as God's pleasure. This intimate knowledge of divine power connects athleticism and Christianity not through celebrity endorsement but through individual experiences of spiritual warfare and Christ-likeness. As such, sports ministry's key function is not outreach to the non-believer, but affirmation of the saved through embodied certainty of religious knowledge.

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