

Prayer in Sport: Perceptions of Sport Managers at a South African University

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Religion is an all-embracing motive of humanity that determines the very essence and destination of humankind's attitudes and actions in relation to others as well as to a deity. Prayer is one way of worshipping and can be defined as a form of personal, intimate communication between the worshipper and a deity. The purpose of prayer is to invoke prosperity and succour, divine protection against peril and forgiveness for sins; as well as thanksgiving and praise. Sport is an aspect of life that also allows for the application of religion in that the overarching motive of psychomotor ability is put to use to glorify and pay homage to a deity. Prayer is a means to an end; however, a number of issues cast doubt on the use of prayer in a sporting context. South Africa's political and spiritual past can be characterised by discrimination enforced through a government based on apartheid. When the African National Congress (ANC) came into power in 1994, it established a democracy that ended all forms of discrimination. Elements of diversity such as language, race and religion would no longer deprive an individual of the right to realise his or her citizenship. Religious worshipping is widely approached with sedate reverence and is mostly performed where the faithful congregate. Sport meetings, by contrast, are mostly intense emotional events characterised by extremes of elation and disappointment. In view of the rather stark contrast between religious experience and sport practice, it is no wonder that the concept of worshipping in the realm of sport can be a source of controversy, uncertainty and opposition. Although the interaction between sport and religion has been a significant area of study (Coakley, 2003; Prebish, 1993 & Hoffman, 1992) perceptions of sport managers regarding prayer as an integral part of a sporting contest remain empirically untested in South Africa.

The aims of this study were to analyze the perceptions of sport managers regarding the practical manifestation of prayer in the sport settings; to understand the motives behind the use of prayer in sport, and to point out the implications it has on sport management practice in South Africa. The research design used to structure the study was interpretive research. An adapted questionnaire of the version designed by Goldfine, Beck, Gillentine and Seidler (2007) was administered to 100 sport managers representing 20 sporting codes at the University of Pretoria. Descriptive statistics were used to interpret the results.

The results are representative of Christianity as a religious denomination. The respondent's general religious beliefs (85.3%) and early experiences of prayer in school sport (89.7%) serve as a frame of reference for their practical testimony of religion in sport. In general results indicated that the majority of respondents (79.4%) recorded positive perceptions of the use of prayer as a particular manifestation of worshipping in a sport context. General religious beliefs (85.3%) and prior experiences of prayer in school sport (89.7%) were posed as contributing reasons to this general positive perception of prayer in sport. Worshipping through prayer was primarily expressed during team gatherings prior to sport competitions. The practice of prayer manifested itself in different formats (e.g. moments of silence and silent prayer) and was led by different role players (e.g. the coach or captain). Primary concerns of this practical testimony of religion in sport were cited as praying for protection against injuries (91.0%); guidance in the competent execution of activities and the fulfilment of abilities (88.1%); asking for an enjoyable match (83.2%); team motivation (84.6%) and strength to participate in a fair and ethical manner (85.1%). A considerable percentage (62.9%) of respondents also indicated that religious gestures (making a cross over the chest; looking up at the heavens; bowing of the head) during competition reinforced earlier prayer. Institutionalising prayer in sport through formal inclusion in codes of conduct for managers, players and coaches was supported by 69.1% of the respondents subject to principles of religious freedom. The liberal South African Constitution (South Africa, 1996) guarantees non-discrimination, religious freedom as well as freedom of association and expression.

The practical manifestation of these constitutional principles is reflected by the recorded results. Religion in sport expands witnessing to others and sets an example worth following by others. The use of prayer in a South African sport context is therefore accepted as athletes' personal freedom to express a profound dependence upon a preferred deity who is publicly honoured and exalted in all facets of life. The application of prayer as a private and / or public testimony of dependence on a chosen deity is the constitutional right of every South African sport manager, coach and athlete. Results indicated that this right is publicly practised. Although all respondents in the research sample based their positive perceptions of Christianity as a religious denomination, significant other religious orientations exist in the South African society. The philosophical-educational implications and value of this study for sport managers falls within the ambit of team management as well as diversity management. South African sport teams are required to reflect the diverse demography of society and as such the religious orientation of athletes. Team management practices, especially at school sport level, should mirror the spectrum of religious orientations and manifestations including traditional indigenous African and Christian beliefs and practices. This study is the

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first in a South African sport context and could serve as a springboard for further research, particularly on managers' legal understanding of prayer in sport, perceptions of spectators regarding public demonstration of prayer in sport, as well as perceptions of managers and coaches from indigenous African belief systems.