Effect of Religiousness and Spirituality on Athletic Directors Decisions Regarding Prayer at Interscholastic Athletic Events

Jennifer Beck, Kennesaw State University
Bernie Goldfine, Kennesaw State University
Todd Seidler, University of New Mexico
Scott Marley, University of New Mexico
Andy Gillentine, University of South Carolina

Legal aspects Abstract 2011-186
Saturday, June 4, 2011
10:50 AM
20-minute oral presentation (Room 11)

Sport and religion have coexisted in many societies and were often times linked to cultural rituals. Coaches and athletes use spirituality, religion, religious beliefs, and prayer with the hope that it will help them to: (a) cope with uncertainty; (b) avoid problems or injuries; (c) give meaning to sport participation; (d) put sport participation into a balanced perspective; (e) establish team solidarity; (f) reaffirm expectations, rules, and social control on teams; (g) assert autonomy in the face of power and; (h) achieve personal and competitive success (Goakley, 2007).

Resistance to religious activities at athletic events, especially pregame prayer, has drawn criticism and has led to several high profile lawsuits. From a legal standpoint, the Supreme Court provided some clarification in their ruling in the case of Santa Fe Independent School District (TX) v. Doe (2000). The court defined practices that fall within the bounds of constitutionality and those practices that would be considered unconstitutional. The ruling confirmed the right of any student to pray before, during, and after athletic events but prohibited the school sponsorship of a religious message as impermissible. The court also concluded that a school representative (e.g. coach, athletic director, principal) cannot take any action to organize or promote formal prayer at athletic events. A recent analysis of actual prayer practices at interscholastic athletic contests revealed that on a nationwide basis, school-official-led prayer occurs regularly (Authors, 2009).

The purpose of this presentation is to investigate whether or not there is any relationship or correlation between the level of athletic director's religious and spiritual beliefs to the presence of prayer at athletic events. In addition, the researchers will report on the participant’s opinions regarding a student and coaches’ right to pray at interscholastic athletic events.

Athletic directors from public high schools were randomly sampled based on regions of the country and school size to assure that all schools were represented in the results. From the original sample, 585 athletic directors responded, resulting in a 24% return rate. The instrument utilized was the Prayer and High School Athletic Events Survey (PAES) which incorporates 37 questions to measure (a) demographic information (b) religious conduct at events (c) current policy on religious activities (d) opinion based questions regarding prayer and (e) religious and spirituality measure. Specifically, for this study, an athletic director’s level of religiosity and spirituality is measured through their stated religious affiliation and attendance at religious/spiritual services; the importance of religion and spirituality in life; and personal religious and spiritual practices.

For schools that had prayer at games, 41.7% of the athletic directors described themselves as “very” religious while of those who did not report prayer at games, 29.7% described themselves as “very” religious. The chi-square analysis found a statistically significant relationship between level of religiousness (1 = “not at all” to 4 = “very”) and the presence of prayer at athletic events with $\chi^2(df = 3, N = 558) = 11.12, p = .01$ and Cramer's $V = .14$. The findings may explain why over 50% of athletic directors often sought comfort through religious or spiritual means (such as praying, meditating, attending a religious or spiritual service) and asked themselves what religious and spiritual beliefs suggest they should do.

Additionally, 71% of athletic directors believe prayer unifies high school athletes and that prayer should be allowed at all high school athletic events (72.8%). Furthermore, athletic directors strongly agreed/agreed (67%) that coaches’ should be allowed to lead prayer. When exploring the student’s rights to participate in prayer, athletic directors responded overwhelmingly (88.4%) that there needs to be options to leave if prayer offends them and the rights on non-participants need to be protected (83.6%).

The results of the study suggest that the majority of athletic directors who defined themselves as being more religious and spiritual were more likely to allow prayer that is conducted by school representatives at athletic events and not abide by the law. However, they do feel the need to protect the rights of non-participants and provide options to leave if prayer offends them. Interestingly, these “solutions” do not address one of the major concerns expressed by the Supreme Court in Santa Fe versus Doe, i.e., that non-adherents are made to feel like outsiders.