Unintended Consequences of Religious Affiliation in Sport: An Analysis of Sport Leadership Decision Making in Spirituality

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The confluence of a sport participant’s religious convictions and their involvement in organized team sport has lead to various unintended consequences for participants. There are countless examples where religious affiliation has negatively impacted an athlete’s participation on a team. Contemporary examples range from Sura Al-Shawk, a Muslim basketball player who was banned from wearing her religious headscarf in a FIBA sanctioned basketball game (Dacey, 2009), to former NBA basketball player, Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf, being mandated by the league to stand for the United State’s national anthem despite his religious beliefs that do not support patriotism. An interesting example of how sport and religion can create division occurred in the state of Washington, where a Jewish high school girls’ basketball team forfeited a state tournament game that was to be played on their Sabbath day of Saturday (Sandsberry, 2010). In all three of these instances, association and league rules were interpreted in a manner that adversely affected a player or a team who chose not to marginalize their religious beliefs.

Religious marginalization is not a new contemporary issue in public school education (Fraser, 1999). A complex intersection of religion and public education still exists after decades of increasingly multicultural communities in the United States. Pivotal educational leaders and court cases have convincingly supported secularism in public schools (Apple, 2006). However, educational leaders still experience challenge of choosing how to manage religious pluralism. Social and moral consequences occur with educational and sport leaders’ decisions regarding religious beliefs and affiliations (Moore, 2007). Questions arise regarding religious privilege in American sport given to those who practice traditional Christian religions. American public high school sport leaders live in a public sphere of Christian normative ideology, and leaders may experience challenge with being sensitive to religious diversity.

With these issues present in education and sports, the purpose of this study is to investigate the decision-making process of sport leaders who interpret the rules of their sport association. Mixed methods of qualitative and quantitative measures were included in the study. Two vignettes were sent to sixty boys and sixty girls high school basketball coaches and their athletic directors from a variety of rural, suburban, and inner city schools in a Midwestern area of the United States with a decision to allow or reject participation on a team of a player who in the first vignette is Catholic and in the second vignette is Orthodox Jewish. Issues involved not being able to participate in team activities due to mass or from sundown Friday until sundown Saturday. The participant weighed the decisions based on the players missing eight of twenty basketball contests, as well as how the participation in the twelve games can affect the other members of the team (e.g. he/she missed prior games, yet gets to play in the next game). Respondents must decide whether to grant participation to the religious players, reject participation, or allow participation with parameters. An open-ended narrative on the key factors associated with the decision was requested from participants, as well as the critical factors that lead to the decisions. In addition to the vignettes, participants also responded to the Spirituality in Sports Test (SIST) (Dillon & Tait, 2000), a 10-item, 7-point scale instrument that measures the religiosity and spirituality of the participant, to gauge their religious predisposition to qualify their responses. Demographic information was also collected. Additionally, themes will be developed using the qualitative data to determine the decision-making process employed by both the coach and the athletic director.

Results from the SIST will be statistically compared with the demographic data, including gender, race/ethnicity, division, type of team coached, and religious affiliation, utilizing measures of central tendency and correlations. The researcher hypothesizes that those coaches who allow the player to participate without consequence for their religious convictions will have a high mean score on the SIST, while those who allow participation with consequence or deny participation will score low on the SIST. Assessment included hierarchical multiple regression analysis with t-tests and multiple analysis of variance to review comparisons of the variables. Results will indicate the influence of a sport leaders’ religiosity on decision making in pluralistic situations with religiously diverse student-athletes. Final results will be discussed in the presentation.

In conclusion, the lack of previous research on sport leaders’ religiosity and spirituality as an influence on decision making in student-athletes’ religious matters supports the need for continued future research. Additional studies could examine other factors that influence sport leaders’ decisions in these situations. Other factors of consideration may include ethical perspectives, likelihood and severity of consequences, and social consensus. Comparisons to intercollegiate athletic directors’ and coaches responses would also provide an additional perspective of leadership decision making in religious dilemmas involving student-athletes. Implications of this research suggest a need to examine effectiveness and fairness of sport leaders’ decision making.
processes. Methods utilized by sport leaders in these dilemmas may require further analysis to provide transparent approaches to these controversial decisions.