RELIGION AND SPORT IN NORTH AMERICA

From athletes praising God to pastors using sport metaphors in the pulpit, the association between sport and religion in North America is often considered incidental. Yet religion and sport have been tightly intertwined for millennia and continue to inform, shape, and critique one another. Moreover, sport, rather than being a solely secular activity, is one of the most important sites for debates over gender, race, capitalism, the media, and civil religion.

Traditionally, scholarly writings on religion and sport have focused on the question of whether sport is a religion, using historical, philosophical, theological, and sociological insights to argue this matter. While these efforts sought to answer an important question, contemporary issues related to sports were neglected, such as globalization, commercialization, feminism, masculinity, critical race theory, and the ethics of doping. This volume contains lively, up-to-date essays from leading figures in the field to fill this scholarly gap. It treats religion as an indispensable prism through which to view sports, and vice versa.

This book is ideal for students approaching the topic of religion and sport. It will also be of interest to scholars studying sociology of religion, sociology of sport, religion and race, religion and gender, religion and politics, and sport in general.

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RELIGION AND SPORT IN NORTH AMERICA

Critical Essays for the Twenty-First Century

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INTRODUCTION

Randall Balmer and Jeffrey Scholes

At the time of this writing, Americans are dealing with a pandemic, continued racial unrest, and extreme political polarization that contributed to the besieging of the Capitol Building on January 6, 2021. This combination of events has forced many to rethink and reorder priorities, both personal and political. These conditions have pressed many into calculating the relative value of work and family as it relates to safety, compensation, age, one’s bank account, geography, demographics, and career aspirations. Hence, a book coming out now about sport may seem particularly inopportune or severely out of touch.

Yes, sport is an edifice that looks shiny, owing its appearance to the vast amounts of money paid by its consumers who are willing to shell out for tickets, merchandise, and the products that teams hawk. Also contributing to its shine are television networks that, in some cases, pay billions of dollars per year to certain leagues for the rights to broadcast and package games in a glossy, hyper-commercialized way. Yet, when we strip the edifice of sport down to its studs, games are played by human beings for a temporary goal that has no real or lasting bearing on lives nor on the body politic against which these lives challenge, negotiate, and perhaps settle on, so the cynic might argue.

Against this, sports have also been trusted to serve as a national bellwether that alerts the wider culture as to when it is appropriate to return to normalcy after a severe crisis.1 For instance, the New York Mets’ and Yankees’ first game after 9/11 did not precede David Letterman’s resumption of his show, but baseball’s resumption more forcefully announced to the nation that “we are starting to get back to normal” far more than a talk-show host could possibly do. Similarly, that professional sports disrupted the collective standstill of the current pandemic by starting the NBA and NHL seasons back up in late July 2020 speaks to its significance in North America. That significance is felt even when sport falters in its timing. In the wake of the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963, then NFL commissioner Pete Rozelle

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decided to have games played the following Sunday while the other league, the AFL, and most colleges decided to cancel their games. Rozelle’s decision was met by the public with discomfort at best, anger at worst. The message sent to the NFL was that playing football while the nation was still in a state of shock was improper. And, accordingly, Rozelle later stated that he regretted the decision. Point being: sport acted as a barometer and a thermostat for the country’s status and was scolded loudly for acting before the curtain lifted or applauded when performing at the time that we needed an act.

What are we to make of the enlarged space that sport takes up in the collective imagination that helps explain its power? That the simple restoration of baseball games after 9/11 signals to Americans that now life can begin to normalize in the face of terrorism speaks much to this power that sport wields, whether one is copacetic with its power or not. Different in the 2020 version of the early reboot is the nature of the enemy. An invisible virus that debilitates the body (and mind in some cases) may be the kind of enemy that could cripple the healthiest of us. Hence, the resumption of major professional sports in the USA on July 30 was in part a show of health despite the climbing deaths around the country and in part a show of a league’s power to stave off the virus through insulated bubbles, frequent testing, and punishments for those who violate protocols.2 What is it about sport in North America that draws our collective eyes toward it as a sign that we would be OK? After all, sports may draw a ridiculous amount of attention during peaceful times that simply seem distracting from more important matters, not representing nor solving them.

Sport proves itself to be the muscle that powers itself beyond the field or the court. It does so in both clandestine and open ways. The coverage of the recent Department of Justice prosecutions of parents paying off college coaches to get their kids into elite schools through sports programs and not on their intellectual merit (dubbed “Operation Varsity Blues”) directs our attention to the “evil” parents and coaches who would enter to such an arrangement. But omitted from these depictions is the fact that sports, at elite and non-elite universities alike, are the soft underbelly of these institutions. Monied parents who want their kids to attend university X but have Y level credentials look to sports, specifically lower-profile sports such as crew and fencing, as a way to smuggle their child through the gates via secret payoffs to these programs. Fairly assumed in their calculation is that sport is a hard driver at the administrative level where enrollment and national prestige holds sway in ways that academic renown could never accomplish. In other words, they know not only of the receptivity of college coaches to take a payout but also of the power of such coaches to be able to flout admission protocols. This example may, in a twisted way, convey that sport has clout outside of its well-known functions: the acceleration of brand-name recognition and potential salary generation at the professional level. And that power can be used not in exploitative ways but in empowering ways. As Prentice Gautt, the first African American football player at the University of Oklahoma, said, “[t]he long-range problems will take a long time to solve. But if they can’t be solved in sports, where can they be solved?”3
Yet, why is it that we seek to intersect religion with sport in this volume? Likelier candidates that could replace the former are economics, politics, feminist thought, race, and sociology—all of which have weighed in on sport for decades. By way of definition, loosely constructed, religion is that which orients its participants to the sacred and transcendent so that mundane and immanent lives can be lodged in a meaningful context—one that infuses such lives with purpose, a moral compass, and answers to ultimate questions. Conversely, sport tends to move in the opposite direction. Competitive athletic activity is concrete, material, temporary, and undoubtedly of this world. Yet, participation in and presentation of sport has spawned a kind of transcendence of its raw materiality since the games of Ancient Greece. The recent hyper-commercialization of sport did not transform its nature but merely enhanced and therefore amplified its transcendence over mere play on the field.

The power of modern sport to capture our imagination \textit{and} pull on our purse strings has obliged a certain, though small, sector of scholars to take notice and comment. The relative inattention paid to sport by scholars of religion likely betrays either a dismissal of sport as a serious object of study (based on its supposed triviality) or on the assumption that religion is experienced and expressed only in traditional, sacred settings. Sport, then, may have its religious players or coaches, but their religiosity, as understood through the sport they play, is not worthy of scholarly consideration.

Alternatively, this volume sees religion as one of the primary ways to understand modern sport. Then sport can act as one of the wide windows through which we may grasp contemporary religious expression. Few would contest the point that religion is a driving force in the lives of most Americans. The same goes for sport. The question is how these two cultural forces are connected, if at all. We assert that they are connected in deeply meaningful ways. In addition, we are asking the reader to think of religion, as it relates to sport but not at all limited to it, in a different way. That religiosity, both expressed in the sporting world and/or religion utilized as a lens through which sport is viewed, can expose fault lines in our body politic that otherwise would go unnoticed or ignored.

So why this book now? Our justification for this volume is twofold. One, many working scholars have determined that sport is a driver of culture. If we can admit of the power of sport (think of the effect that a mere LeBron James tweet possesses to mobilize thousands to take certain political issues more seriously), then we should ask ourselves, what or who granted this power as such? Certainly, neoliberal capitalism combined with the rapid increase in the monetized power that athletes have built aids in the explanation of the acquisition of new-found power that elite athletes now possess. The power of sport to dictate the news cycle as well as modify the psyche of the garden-variety fan should bid all scholars to take notice.

Two, by our estimation, we have entered a third period of religion and sport scholarship in which scholars are increasingly asking about the role that race, gender, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, pluralism, and neoliberal capitalism play in shaping both religion and sport. Hence the relationship between religion and
sport is being reimagined in light of these considerations. Journal articles and monographs demonstrate this trend, but an edited volume, particularly one that highlights religion and sport in North America, has heretofore not been published.

**Religion and Sport Scholarship: A Brief History**

We see three periods in the scholarship involving religion and sport. These periods are not wholly discrete by any measure but are informative; the boundaries that guard these episodes are admittedly porous and more heuristic than definitive. Older ways of thinking about the relationship between religion and sport rear their heads today, and newer, more progressive approaches demonstrate a reliance on the foundations. The spirit and content of this volume should not represent a hand slap (or to use a sports culture expression, a “Heisman”) to the scholarship of the past. Instead, the essays in this volume draw heavily on the ideas that came before and perhaps are simply refinements attuned to the current culture. Still, there are general contours of these time periods that help us identify past patterns of thinking that, in turn, locate the essays in this volume.

The first period of religion and sport scholarship, starting in the mid-1970s, was surely inspired by the sudden and exponential rise of the attention paid to sports. As such, what naturally followed was the question of whether sport possessed religious qualities or was even a religion itself. The rise of modern, commercialized sport in Western culture at this time prompted these inquiries and produced some penetrating answers. Michael Novak’s, *The Joy of Sports* (1976), Frank Deford’s long piece, “Religion and Sport” in *Sports Illustrated* (1976), and Allen Guttmann’s groundbreaking book, *From Ritual to Record* (1978) signal the beginning of this period. Novak argues that sport is “somehow, a religion”; Deford contends that sport has replaced religion, and Christians are not handling it well; and Guttmann similarly argues that modern, rationalized sport had “sidelined” religion without offering any value judgment as to whether this was the right thing to do. All three, to varying degrees, begin with working definitions of religion and sport that then encourage a way of talking about how they might relate. The literature that followed invited expansions on this theme as sport was likened to a kind of folk religion and a civil religion. Admittedly, religion and sport scholarship largely lay dormant throughout the 1980s. One explanation for this is that this first period did not successfully establish an actual field of study. Novak’s lifework involved the locating the religious roots of the free-market system; *The Joy of Sports* was an outlier and a book that he conceded writing merely because he was a die-hard sports fan. Deford was a sports journalist, not a scholar.

A resurgence in publications beginning in the 1990s and subsiding in the 2000s heralds the second period. Here we find a tendency of scholars to emphasize the potential of sport to act as a vehicle for transmitting religious values yet lament the failure of current-day commercialized sport to actualize them. Largely gone is the strict siloing of religion and sport—a prerequisite for arguments written during the first period. Instead, we see a broadening out of the relationship, historically
speaking, between religion and sport. A renewed interest in “muscular Christianity,” the mid- to late-nineteenth-century movement in England and the USA that attempted to fuse athleticism and strength with the Christian faith so that Victorian age boys would beef up, drew attention to historical developments and their bearing on the present. The legacy of muscular Christianity, both beneficial and deleterious, helped explain the ambivalence expressed in this second period thought. Shirl Hoffman’s edited volume, Sport and Religion (1992),9 and his later Good Game (2010),10 Robert J. Higgs’s God in the Stadium (1995),11 and Joseph L. Price’s From Season to Season (2001),12 stand as prominent examples of this period. Clifford Putney’s history of muscular Christianity, Muscular Christianity: Manhood and Sports in Protestant America, 1880–1920 (2001),13 and Tony Ladd and James A. Mathisen’s Muscular Christianity: Evangelical Protestants and the Development of American Sport (1999),14 expose muscular Christian residues in evangelical sports organizations and sports ministry overall.

Historicizing the conceptualization of the relationship between religion and sport largely prevented the making of assertions that sport is a religion. The chameleon character of both religion and sport defies durable, timeless categorization. Yet this historicizing also opened the door to a critique of the relationship between religion and sport. If modern, hyper-capitalized sport is no longer able to convey values such as humility, fairness, and honesty, as it was putatively able to do in it past, then Christian history must be leveraged as a call to Christians to view their allegiance to sport askance. A kind of moral reckoning was often called for, not unlike that declared by Billy Sunday a century prior. Or Deford’s screed holds up minus the rigid ontologies of religion and sport.

The third period, in which we argue that this volume finds itself, certainly relies upon previous scholarship to make its case. But this period, beginning around a decade ago, expands those previously constructed boundaries even further. This expansion is enlarged through a heightened awareness of the ways in which the politics of race, gender, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, pluralism, and the neoliberal capitalism under which all are of these categories are entangled, have been and are still intertwined with sport. Tabled are questions of whether sport is a religion or whether religious values are accurately displayed in sport. Such questions, while timely in earlier scholarship, often betray metaphysical assumptions that are baked into the questions and answers. A presumed ontological stability of “religion” and “sport” served many scholars in the first period, and this is often replaced with historically based critiques of both religion and sport that have a confessional quality to them in the second period. The condemnation, restoration, disregarded, or even abandonment of modern sport is then galvanized by theology, orthodoxy, moral absolutism, and/or religious essentialism.

This third period, alternatively, is marked by a refusal to use ontological or theological metaphysics as first principles that guide research and production. Instead, the reality of the divine and the sincerity of faith, as expressed by athletes, coaches, and fans, is taken seriously in a functional sense, while the substance backing their religiosity is bracketed off. Here, one’s beliefs and practices as an evangelical or Muslim athlete, for example, can be seen as shaped by and as a
shaper of race, gender, ethics, and economics. In other words, theological concepts and the significance of religiously driven actions are not rejected out of hand. Rather, the religiosity of the people involved with chosen topics is repurposed from serving as a foundation to acting as a guide. And the guidance being sought is not that which leads to a “theory of everything” that reveals the “real” relationship between religion and sport. Nor is it that which “guides” some scholars to reprove fellow Christians for their sporting allegiance because sport is so infected with illegality and profit. Instead, it is reiterated that religion is an indispensable prism through which sport should be refracted and then observed. Rebecca Alpert’s Out of Left Field (2011),15 Annie Blazer’s Playing for God (2015),16 Daniel A. Grano’s The Eternal Present of Sport (2018),17 and God, Games, and Globalization, edited by Alpert and Arthur Remillard (2019),18 are several prominent representatives of this third period.

There are two main reasons for the ushering in of this third period. Before the mid-2000s, theoretical frameworks such as critical race theory and intersectionality as well as identity-based disciplines, such as queer, Latinx, and disability studies (to name a few) had not been adopted into the mainstream academy. Two, sport, in particular professional sport, went through an apolitical phase from the mid-1980s into the 2000s. Led by Michael Jordan and later continued by Tiger Woods and others, this phase saw elite athletes more preoccupied with landing lucrative corporate sponsorships, and corporations were listening. Apolitical stances by athletes were taken so as to avoid alienating groups of consumers. Consequently, much religion and sport scholarship during this era focused on history and ethics (though little concerning greed) which lacked a hook, at least from the athletes’ perspective, that could bring race, class, or gender into arguments. If athletes are not talking about politics, why should we?

Recently the wider public has been made painfully aware of extant racism as seen in uneven policing, education, incarceration, Oscar nominations, college admission, and job hires. The public murder of George Floyd has blown the lid off a simmering pot in a country that naively assumed that racism had been put to bed a long time ago. Race, and its similarity, yet substantive dissimilarity, to gender, ethnicity, disability, and class has invited new ways to frame the relationship between religion and sport. That religion is a thing, that sport is a thing, and that our job is to make sense of how these two things interact independently is over. Religion and sport each have been forged in the cauldron of societal stew. Therefore, their contact is less of a meeting between two strangers and more that of an inbred marriage.

Much to the chagrin of many theologians and religion scholars who believe that the only ones to be writing about sports are journalists, scholars writing in this third period instead recognize the value of the religion and sport connection to make a point about something else altogether. In other words, the value of the religion and sport relationship has become largely instrumental rather than substantive, material instead of metaphysical. We view this as a positive development in the field. By decentering a stand-alone relationship between religion and sport, race, gender, and other considerations become central as agents that mold both.
The essays that follow assert that sport is, yes, a site at which societal issues are expressed and wrestled with, not just a display of overpaid athletes doing their thing. Moreover, these authors largely presume that religion cannot be ignored in any discussion about sport. Or the way we think about sport is automatically caught up in the ways we think about religion. Yet the religion discussed in these chapters is broadly construed rather than traditional and institutional, and function is favored over substance.

Part I: “Evangelicalism and Sport,” contains essays that strive to scramble the signal historically given to us about current-day American evangelicalism. The historical line inscribed on American soil first by the Puritans and then threads itself through towering Victorian-era pastors and then modernized through the ministries of Billy Graham and Jerry Falwell is challenged here. Paul Emory Putz asks whether the demonstrably louder and more demanding voices of white, male evangelicals in the late 1960s and 1970s had anything to do with the equally demonstrable “revolt of the Black athlete” that occurred simultaneously. In another essay, Zachary Smith further troubles the water that tends to keep evangelicalism and sport afloat, at least as far as the wider public is concerned, by questioning the assumed association between Christian mixed martial arts (MMA) and white evangelical masculinity. Finally, Daniel Grano sees in the case of former disgraced Liberty University head football coach Hugh Freeze an instrumentalization of forgiveness to protect white, male evangelicalism in the Trump era vis-à-vis college football.

The essays in Part II, “Sport as a Religio-cultural Vehicle,” argue that sport is a powerful medium that can do much of the work of religion by clarifying what it means to exist in a diverse community, to exist as an individual in a complex world, and to exist in a world plagued by extreme difficulty and hardship. Megan Eaton Robb and Max Dugan challenge the common idea that sport, when engaged in American Islamic communities, serves as a tool for Western assimilation alone. Rather, armed with evidence gathered from their study of an Islamic community in Pennsylvania, they contend that sport raises as many worries for those concerned with cultural and religious assimilation as those pushing for assimilation. In another essay, Nicholas William Howe Bukowski argues that the formation of a church soccer team by an evangelical church in British Columbia proves essential in moving participants past an individualist religious life to a more productive, collectivist one. Terry Shoemaker mines the significance of sports through its absence as experienced during the early months of the pandemic in 2020. It is the relationship between religion and sport that illuminates a deep human desire for sports seasons and competitive activity—a desire that is religious and one that is uniquely expressed in times of lack.

The essays in Part III, “Religion, Sport, and the Market,” lay out the relationship between religion and sport through the all-encompassing logic and power of neoliberal capitalism. The featured authors brook no interpretation of religion or sport that omits the influence of profit-seeking, marketing, the impetus to grow capital, and the pervasiveness of “the market” to help justify all of these endeavors. Jason M. Smith finds family resemblances between religion and college football
that owe themselves less to appearance and more to how each wield power, specifically through the strict management of student athletes regarding their finances. Cody Musselman investigates Reebok’s “Be More Human” campaign, which is targeted at CrossFitters, and discovers that spirituality is being sold to consumers as much as gear is. Lastly, Jeremy Sabella argues that the relatively recent obsession with fantasy football draws on certain religious sensibilities to transform the way that the sport is consumed. Hence the conversion of play on the field to data (which is then organized and dissected for maximum output) by run-of-the-mill fantasy-team owners should be understood as a ritual within a form of neoliberal religion.

“Religion and Sport through a Racial Frame,” Part IV of this volume, contains essays that position race and ethnicity at the heart of selected events involving religion and sport. Against the widely held assumption that sport is a “colorblind meritocracy,” these authors make clear that race and ethnicity have structured sport in North America and continue to do so—primarily in ways that maintain white supremacy. These essays ask how does religion elucidate, challenge, and possibly reverse the damage done by racism and ethnocentrism in sport? Arthur Remillard inquires into the discrepancy between the idyllic, sacred narrative of long-distance running in the USA versus the reality that African Americans have been historically excluded from the sport both in formal competition and in its origin story. Remillard explores the complicated legacy of Black running pioneer Ted Corbitt in order to expose the tension between now lifting him up as a mythical figure and the fact that Black men are still being murdered for merely jogging in their own neighborhood. In Chapter 12, Annie Blazer supplements the story of Native American sports mascots existing as reminder of colonization, degradation, and caricature with a religion story. Blazer avers that European Christianity established white superiority that was carted across the ocean and therefore must be seriously considered in the ongoing reckoning with team names that perpetuate destructive stereotypes. Former NBA star and Muslim Mahmoud Abdul Rauf is the subject of Lori Latrice Martin’s chapter. Martin finds that scholarly treatment of the public criticism of Abdul Rauf’s refusal to stand for the national anthem has a blind spot—a “religion of whiteness” more accurately explains the fervor behind removing Abdul Rauf from the league in the mid-1990s. Carmen M. Nanko-Fernández’s essay rounds out this final section. Nanko-Fernández classifies certain activistic stances taken by athletes outside the play on the field but within the confines of a stadium to be disruptions of our “national liturgy.” Hence, protests that take place within the “sacred space” of a sports arena can be considered heretical.

Religion and sport respectively have changed quite a bit over the past fifty years in North America and elsewhere. This volume attempts to engage these changes and meet them head-on with new and compelling ways of thinking about both religion and sport separately and in conjunction. The subordination of rigid definitions of religion or sport to broader, more fluid descriptions of both allow the inclusion of long neglected yet salient issues into the discourse as well as the inclusion of marginal sports such as CrossFit and MMA into the fold. If the reader nominally agrees that, indeed, religion and sport scholarship is in its third stage, then much ground has cleared for innovative ideas to continue to break the surface and take root.
Notes

1. We use “sport” to refer to the general institution of sport. “Sports” refers to the collection of more than one sport, such as basketball, lacrosse, and swimming.
2. We add “major professional sports” here because an Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) fight was held on May 9, 2020, in Florida. UFC is quickly gaining fans and cultural power, but it has yet to break into what we would describe as “major.”
PART I

Evangelicalism and Sport
THERE IS TALK OF BLACK POWER

Christian Athletes and the Revolt of the Black Athlete

Paul Emory Putz

Introduction

In late November 1967, a group of Black athletes met at Second Baptist Church in Los Angeles to discuss a potential boycott of the 1968 Olympics. Organized by Harry Edwards as part of the Olympic Project for Human Rights, the meeting represented a shift in the way Black athletes were engaging with sports. Prior to the 1960s, Black athletes often saw participation in predominantly white sporting spaces as a way to “advance the race” and gradually move toward racial justice and equality. But during the 1960s many grew disillusioned with that tactic. With Muhammad Ali, Bill Russell, and Jim Brown (among others) leading the way, a growing number of Black athletes began to believe that mere inclusion in predominantly white sporting contexts was not enough, and that far from being an engine of racial advancement sports actually perpetuated racism in American society. The gathering at Second Baptist was an attempt to build an organized coalition that could use sports as a platform to challenge the persistence of racism in American society; it was a key moment in what Edwards would call “the revolt of the Black athlete.”

Although a unified boycott of the 1968 Olympics did not occur, the “revolt” did inspire protests and change in other ways, including the now-iconic moment on the medal stand in Mexico City when sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos raised their black-gloved fists skyward. It also reached numerous college campuses, inspiring Black athletes to speak out and demand greater support and consideration for the difficulties they faced at predominantly white schools. So pervasive was the athletic activism that it received attention from Sports Illustrated, the “Bible of sports,” which published a five-part series in 1968 on racism in sports titled “The Black Athlete: A Shameful Story.”

This flurry of activity in the late 1960s and early 1970s is well-traveled material, receiving substantial scholarly attention and multiple book-length treatments. And

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yet there is at least one element of the story that has not yet been analyzed: the interaction between the Black athlete “revolt” and evangelical sports ministries.\footnote{4} Beginning in the 1950s, organizations like the Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) and Athletes in Action (AIA) built a Christian athlete movement that gained momentum during the very years that the Black athlete revolt captured national attention. Like the revolt, the Christian athlete movement was built around the use of athletes—particularly male athletes—to promote a social agenda. Yet its members generally avoided protests and demonstrations, choosing instead to affirm the basic structures of American society. If we revisit the scene at Second Baptist in 1967, we can see this contrast in plain sight. Consider how Harry Edwards described the actions of “Deacon” Dan Towler, an ex-athlete Black minister and a leading figure in the Christian athlete movement:

[Towler] pointed out how much sports had done for Negroes and how great a privilege it was for a Negro to compete for America. A chorus of boos greeted his words. Undeterred, he continued, this time attacking the athletes who had previously spoken as being unintelligent and gullible. Finally, as his remarks began to draw threats from the audience, he was shouted down. Other Negroes who had obviously come to try to dissuade the athletes form supporting the movement left the meeting after witnessing the fate of the “Deacon.”\footnote{5}

In his account, Edwards did not probe the religious motivations behind Towler’s words and actions, depicting him instead as representative of a generic “traditional” Black approach to sports held by some in the older generation. But if we want to understand the ways that race and religion have been intertwined in American sports history, we should take a fresh look at Towler and his fellow leaders—white and Black—in the Christian athlete movement. What did they think of the Black athlete revolt? How did they respond when Black Power came to sports? Examining their responses can help to reveal the ways in which ideas about race and American identity were central to the religious formulations of evangelical sports ministries and influential in setting long-standing boundaries about who gets to be considered a “Christian athlete” and what ideas are welcome in the movement.

**Sports Ministry Origins**

The original catalyst for the Christian athlete movement—as well as the most developed sports ministry in the late 1960s—was the FCA. Founded in 1954 during the Cold War, the FCA was part of a broader “muscular Christianity” ideology and movement that had its origins in the nineteenth century. Like its nineteenth-century predecessors, the FCA linked sports with American nationalism, seeking to identify the USA with religious values associated especially with white Protestant men. As FCA founder Don McClanen explained in 1955, the FCA’s goal was to mobilize “devoted athletes who wish to share their Christ-centered convictions with others at a time when Communistic teachings threaten our way of life.”\footnote{6} The FCA took this
impulse to defend the “American way” and turned it into a full-fledged movement. While there were plenty of Christians in sports before the FCA, they did not think of themselves as a distinct “Christian athlete” group with shared interests and goals. “I’ve been in major college athletic activities for more than a quarter-century,” early FCA leader and University of Denver athletic director Tad Wieman explained in 1956. “It was only through the fellowship movement that I found out that some of the men with whom I had been dealing for years have deep Christian values.”

By the 1960s, the FCA had developed a number of institutional and cultural spaces to build on its early success. There were summer camps for high-school athletes, breakfasts at national coaching conventions, city-wide evangelistic rallies, a magazine titled The Christian Athlete, and the grassroots development of team prayers and Bible studies led by FCA members. Famous athletes and coaches like Bobby Richardson, Bill Glass, Paul Dietzel, and Tom Landry advocated for the organization, while lesser-known sports leaders carried on its work at local and regional levels. So successful was the FCA at building the Christian athlete movement that it soon had competitors. In 1966, AIA was formed as the sports-specific arm of Campus Crusade for Christ, while in 1967 maverick evangelist Ira Lee “Doc” Eshleman created his own sports chaplaincy organization. Both AIA and Eshleman were key players in the launch of another sports ministry, Pro Athletes Outreach (PAO), in 1971. While there were differences in method and emphases in all of these organizations, they grew out of the soil of white Protestantism and shared similar evangelical sensibilities. Writing in 1976, Sports Illustrated’s Frank Deford lumped them all together with the term “Sportianity.”

The Christian athlete movement may have been led by white Protestant men, but it was open to racial inclusion. This, too, was due in part to the Cold War context out of which the FCA was formed. The reality of race-based segregation clashed with America’s self-perception as a land of freedom and equality under God. Thus, sports became a popular venue for promoting the image of a pluralistic and inclusive USA. The US government projected this image by sponsoring global tours featuring prominent Black athletes, and the FCA followed this model of image-conscious inclusion. Black Methodist minister and former NFL player Dan Towler (whom we have already met) and University of California, LA (UCLA) track star Rafer Johnson were both involved early on, as was Branch Rickey, the man who signed Jackie Robinson. Moreover, the FCA’s promotional pamphlets often featured at least one African American, and FCA speakers frequently emphasized the importance of interracial cooperation. “There is no fatherhood of God without a brotherhood of man,” Presbyterian minister Louis Evans Sr. told FCA campers in 1961. “You get out and call everybody in this world brother or somebody’s gonna get there ahead of you and call every man comrade and then we’re gonna have one heck of a mess.”

Support for racial inclusion among sports ministry leaders was compatible with what historian Steven Miller has described as “a postwar elite evangelical consensus on race.” This consensus held that racism was a sin but framed it as a matter of personal conscience and internal belief rather than of cultural and structural
inequalities that needed to be remedied by the state. Following the lead of figures like Billy Graham, elite evangelicals in the 1960s aimed for the goal of “color blindness” that placed them to the left of segregationists but also made them suspicious of race-conscious movements and policies. Since racism was viewed as an individual-sin problem, it was an issue that could only be solved on a person-by-person basis, either through education and relationships or through a new birth in Christ.  

The FCA preached its message of color-blind racial inclusion even as it expanded its reach into the South in the 1950s and early 1960s, a tricky proposition in the era of massive resistance from white segregationists. In 1961, FCA leaders introduced a new alphabetical system for housing assignments at its summer camps in an attempt to prevent white Southerners from implementing their own segregated housing arrangements. In 1963, when FCA leaders were discussing two potential sites for their first summer conference in the South, they stipulated that “any camp must include all races” and rejected one possible location because no information “relative to the inclusion of other races at this camp” was forthcoming. When the FCA finally launched its first summer camp in the South in 1964, holding it at Black Mountain, North Carolina, the camp featured three notable Black leaders, including legendary Black basketball coach John McLendon. Through actions like these, the FCA felt it was capitalizing on the “great opportunity to be a creative influence with the general racial problem today.”

Entries in both Courage to Conquer and Sports Alive!, two 1966 collections of Christian athlete profiles, provided the FCA’s preferred approach to being a “creative influence” for change. The entries discussed the friendship between NFL teammates and FCA members Jerry Stovall (a white Southern Baptist) and Prentice Gautt (a Black Presbyterian who had been the first Black athlete at the University of Oklahoma), using it to show how such relationships could help bridge racial divides. “He helped me, a Southerner, to see that a soul has no color,” Stovall wrote. “There are no barriers between us,” Gautt explained.

Because we’re following the same Lord, we understand and trust one another. That’s one value of the FCA. It’s ecumenical and interracial. When Christian athletes—and other people for that matter—play and live together in close fellowship, they come to know and understand one another.

While the FCA did not encourage athletes and coaches to support the civil-rights movement or to endorse the passage of laws that would end segregation, by using sports to encourage interracial cooperation FCA leaders believed they were advancing American progress in a safe and orderly way.

**Reactionary Responses to the Revolt**

In the first half of the 1960s, the FCA could make a legitimate claim to be somewhat progressive when it came to race, particularly in the South. But the coming of the Black athlete revolt in the late 1960s challenged the organization’s self-perception as a
place of inclusion. The FCA tended toward a slow and gradual approach with predominantly white leaders operating as gatekeepers; the Black athlete revolt demanded immediate change. The FCA was a Christian, integrationist, and mostly white sports-boosting organization, while most prominent leaders of the Black athlete movement criticized the sports establishment, were skeptical of prioritizing integration at the expense of Black institutions and either rejected Christianity as a “white” religion (particularly those who sympathized with the Nation of Islam) or de-emphasized Christianity as a core aspect of their identity. “We don’t catch hell because we’re Christians,” Lew Alcindor (later Kareem Abdul-Jabbar) told a reporter in 1967. “We catch hell because we’re black.”

An early sign of the new state of affairs came from emblems of the old: Jerry Stovall and Prentice Gautt. In 1967, Gautt joined his fellow Black teammates on the St. Louis Cardinals in signing a letter that aired grievances over racist treatment at the hands of white Cardinals players and coaches. Those concerns were amplified in 1968 when the Cardinals’ racial turmoil was profiled by Jack Olsen in his “Black Athlete” series for Sports Illustrated. The publicized frustration of the Black players caused great embarrassment for Stovall, whom they described as a racist “who poses as a good Christian boy.” While it is unclear if Gautt shared these specific criticisms, it was nevertheless a blow to Stovall’s view of himself as an open-minded white Southerner. According to one of his white teammates, Stovall responded with exasperation: “Why, I even took Prentice Gautt into my parish church in Monroe, Louisiana.”

The charges levied against Stovall by his teammates pointed to a new reality emerging as segregation ended and as the Black athlete revolt challenged the depth of racism within supposedly racially integrated spaces. With desegregation and symbolic inclusion no longer enough to stake a legitimate claim to the mantle of racial progressiveness, evangelical sports ministries were forced to consider the claims and actions of Black activists. While the Christian athlete movement never adopted a single unified approach, it nevertheless played the role of guardian, limiting the range of possibilities that it validated as legitimate responses to racism for Christians.

One response that garnered substantial support was to reject the demands of Black activists and to rally around a defense of “traditional” values and discipline. Within this group there were some white men who had a strong track record of racial inclusion in the past. Clarence “Biggie” Munn, ex-football coach and athletic director at Michigan State, is a good example. The Spartan football team had a history of racial integration dating back to Munn’s time as coach in the 1950s and continuing with Munn’s successor, Duffy Daugherty, in the 1960s. By 1966, when Michigan State matched up with Notre Dame in the so-called “game of the century,” over half of the starters on the Spartan team were Black—Notre Dame, meanwhile, had only one Black starter.

Munn wore his reputation for both Christianity and racial inclusion proudly. He liked to claim (incorrectly) that his teams were the first to pray after games, and he served as president of the FCA’s advisory board in its formative years, playing a key role in securing the FCA’s place within the college football community. In 1961,
meanwhile, he criticized segregated Southern teams for their refusal to play integrated teams, arguing that such teams should not be ranked number one in the polls. A flood of virulently racist hate mail ensued from white Southerners.  

But when Michigan State’s Black football players joined the revolt in 1968, demanding better treatment and more Black coaches, Munn responded with defiance. “I will resign my position as Director of Athletics when I am told who I have to hire and who my coaches must play by the athletes themselves,” he declared. “In Athletics I have always been for fair play and equal rights no matter what color or creed.”

Munn’s resistance to ceding authority and submitting to the demands of young Black athletes extended to events beyond Michigan State. In 1969, Detroit-based sportswriter Roger Stanton penned an article titled “Blacks Are Ill-advised” in which he denounced Black athletes as prima donnas. “The greatest tragedy of the 1969 football season is the revolt of certain black football players,” Stanton wrote. “They are hurting themselves, their schools, and the entire Negro race.” Munn wrote to tell Stanton that the article was “fantastic.” In 1970, when Stanford announced that it would no longer schedule athletic contests with Brigham Young University because of the Mormon church’s policy of prohibiting Blacks from the priesthood, Munn sent letters to confidants decrying Stanford for “making a great mistake.” “If there is one place where they have been fair to all it is in sports, no matter the color, creed or anything,” Munn wrote, before making a reference to his own situation. “I hope I can keep it going here without too much in the way of people demanding and wanting without doing the job.”

Another college football coach prominently involved with the FCA, Paul Dietzel, echoed Munn’s concerns with Black athlete activism—although without Munn’s strong track record for racial inclusion. Dietzel had coached segregated teams at Louisiana State University (LSU) from 1955 to 1961, winning a national championship with an undefeated season in 1958. That same year, Dietzel had also become more involved with the FCA. In interviews, he credited the FCA’s summer camp, which he attended with a few of his players, for providing the spark that his team needed for their title-winning season. Dietzel moved from LSU to Army in 1961, and then to South Carolina in 1966, where he served as football coach and athletic director until 1974. At both Army (1965) and South Carolina (1969), Dietzel recruited the school’s first Black football players. Yet in both cases Dietzel was a follower rather than a leader, lagging behind peer institutions.

While Dietzel supported and worked for desegregation—albeit on his own terms—he had an entirely different view of the Black athlete revolt. In a 1969 interview with the South Carolina student newspaper the Gamecock, Dietzel depicted the growth of athlete activism as a nefarious plot. “Athletic departments throughout the country have been finding that they are being lampooned by different militant groups,” he stated, further explaining that “these problems are carefully planned.” Dietzel cited reports from friends in the coaching profession who had Black players on their teams. Those players, Dietzel claimed, regularly received phone calls “from highly militant groups” across the country who urged the Black athletes to take actions “of a disruptive nature.”
For Dietzel, Munn, and others in the reactionary camp, the problem with the Black athlete revolt was its apparent attack on authority. They lumped it in with the broader protest movements associated with college students in the 1960s, seeing their opposition to the revolt not as a result of entrenched racism but rather as a defense of traditional values. By framing the Black athlete revolt in this way, Christian coaches mirrored the growing support among white evangelicals for the “law and order” rhetoric embraced by Richard Nixon.29

As president of the American Football Coaches Association (AFCA) in 1969, Dietzel took this approach when he wrote to rally his fellow coaches to “hold your ground” and maintain discipline. Dietzel never specifically mentioned race, but the recent demands by Black athletes were clearly among the targets Dietzel had in mind. “For anyone to imply that we as coaches have no right to enforce training rules is completely absurd,” Dietzel declared. “Where in the entire world can you get along with people in society without accepting the standards laid down by your superiors. We will always have superiors.” Dietzel went on to blame “militants” who “seek out our problems to exploit them” and called on the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) to provide a remedy to restore coaches’ authority: eliminating the guaranteed four-year scholarship and replacing it with a one-year scholarship renewed at the behest of the coach.30

As leaders in the Christian athlete movement, Dietzel and Munn saw their faith as central to their stand against the subversion of authority. In his 1969 letter to coaches, Dietzel cited a New Testament passage about athletes training (1 Corinthians 9:24–27) as evidence of the need for discipline. Speaking to the annual AFCA convention the following year, Dietzel told his fellow coaches about attending FCA summer camps with his son, where the athletes in attendance modeled the sort of disciplined approach that Dietzel desired. FCA athletes, Dietzel claimed, were “the kind of man that I am very happy my son has picked as his hero.”31 Munn, too, saw Christianity as the answer. After evangelical leader Billy Graham was selected grand marshal of the 1971 Rose Bowl parade, Munn praised the decision. “[B]ringing the facts of Christianity to the public and to our country is so greatly needed in order to save our civilization,” Munn wrote.32

These reactionary sentiments were not confined to white Christian coaches. Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University’s (A&M’s) Jake Gaither—described by Sports Illustrated as “most famous black coach in America”—spoke out against the proposed Black boycott of the Olympics in 1968 and also banned long hair and facial hair on his football team. “I hope we never let down our rules and regulations,” he told a group of coaches at an AFCA gathering in 1970. “It is the last bastion in our educational institutions for discipline.”33 At the time, Gaither was not as connected to the FCA as Munn and Dietzel, both of whom served in formal leadership positions. But Gaither had long viewed his coaching role as something akin to the task of a minister. He was, as historian Derrick White has written, a “profoundly religious southerner” with a “deeply held social conservatism.”34 He led his team in pregame prayers, expected players to attend church, and sought to instill moral values in his athletes. By the late 1960s, he found an increasingly