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Watson, Nick J. (2011) Theological and psychological reflections on identity in sport. Journal of Religion and Popular Culture, 23 (2). pp. 182-200.

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Theological and Psychological Reflections on Identity in Sport

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Citation: Watson, N.J. (2011) Theological and Psychological Reflections on Identity in Sport, *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*, Summer, 23(2): 182-200. See: http://utpjournals.metapress.com/content/10272u2w06668011/?p=0fc9d52f35f247518c54f6508abf80d0&pi=6

Abstract

This essay examines 'athletic identity' from a Christian theological and psychological standpoint. In discussing the concept of identity within the sports world, I address a range of related issues, such as idolatry, sin and states of heart such as pride and humility. According to Phil Night, founder and chairperson of *Nike*, sports 'define the culture of the world'[1] and thus an examination of the cultural context in which identity is formed is also presented. Areas for future research are provided in the conclusion, for example, reflections on identity for sportspersons with physical and intellectual disabilities.

Introduction

> 'Sport, as many commentators have noted, is the new religion. It has superseded Christianity in many cultural theorists' eyes as the social practice par excellence that initiates persons into rules and norms of virtuous and vicious behaviours which orientate us more broadly in the world'.[2]
>
> Mike McNamee

> 'Fourth in the Olympics hurt, but retirement is like a death in the family … I struggled for three months … I'd walk around and just start filling up. I'd wake up lost. I didn't know what to do. My emotions were so intense I felt I'd lost a member of the family. I'd lost a major part of my life, something was dead. Everything I'd lived for was over'.
>
> British Olympic Decathlete, Dean Macey, on retiring from sport[3]

[1] Theologians and philosophers[4] have argued that we need to think more philosophically about the meaning of sport participation and competition. Kretchmar has recently suggested that in studying sport 'to do ethics *in vacuo'*, without some sort of metaphysical (i.e., religious) basis is a questionable endeavor. He sees athletes as 'meaning-seeking, story-telling creatures', who can encounter real drama, experience excellence and self-

discovery in healthy sporting contests.[5] In relation, a small number of sport psychologists have also challenged the current dominance within their discipline of positivistic research and cognitive-behavioral consultancy *techniques* advocating the need for more holistic, philosophical, existential) and spiritual and religious approaches.[6]

[2] These recent shifts toward spiritual and religious concepts, within the disciplines of sport philosophy and sport psychology are encouraging and make a significant contribution to my thinking in terms of understanding the complexities of athletic identity. This said, the foundational source of identity (ontologically and epistemologically)[7] throughout this body of work is, as Frankl[8] states, '… a *human* phenomenon rather than divine', and thus puts the *self* at the centre of the framework of meaning (humanism and naturalism), rather than God (supernaturalism). I will argue that this is *diametrically opposed* to a Christian theological perspective of identity as described in the Bible, in which humans are called to deny them*selves* and live *in* Christ (Matt. 16: 24-27).[9] This is *not* as burdensome a thing as it may sound to some but rather something that, as C.S Lewis[10] notes, actually leads humans to freedom of heart, peace and becoming 'more truly themselves…it is when I turn to Christ, when I give up myself to His personality, that I first begin to have a personality of my own'.

[3] In hopefully adding something new to the valuable past psychological, psychiatric and clinical, sociological and pedagogical work on athletic identity, and related research on self-worth and dispositional neurotic perfectionism in sport that is based on a secular and humanistic worldview[11], this approach provides a significantly different understanding of personhood and how we understand ourselves and others in competitive sport. Its core premise is that humans' identity, that is, their feeling, thinking, attitudes and behavior, should be grounded in, and flow from, the heart of a loving Father God. As Paul states in

the Bible (Acts 17: 28) when addressing the Athenian philosophers, 'for in him we live and move and have our being …'.

[4] This study is also needed due to longitudinal sports ethics research that has suggested that athletes in Christian and secular American schools show very little difference, if any, in moral-reasoning and that Christian athletes had a tendency to compartmentalize their faith and exclude it from competitive sport[12]. Why is this so? Can Christian athletes simply learn and follow the strict moral code of the Bible (an important dimension of Christian faith) and feel, think and act in the heat of competition and in relationships, in a Christ-like manner? I will argue not, due to the foundational biblical principle that the state of the 'heart' of the believer, their *disposition* - the depth of relationship and intimacy with God through Jesus Christ - is the source of all right and wrong, feeling, thinking and acting.

> 'Above all else guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life'.
>
> (Proverbs 4: 23)

> 'The mouth speaks out of the overflow of the heart'.
>
> (Matthew 12: 34)

[5] My anthropological start point is predicated on the biblical position that *all* humans are made in the image of God - *imago Dei* (Gen. 1: 27) and comprise soul, body and spirit (1Thessalonians. 5: 23). This division of self is useful in analyzing identity in sport. However, throughout this paper, I wish to combat the Platonic-Cartesian mind-body dualism entrenched in the western thought by referring to the soul, body and spirit holistically as the *heart*, a Hebrew and Pauline perspective.[13] This view maintains that the

human-being is thoroughly integrated, though with different aspects.

[6] Consistent with this idea that the Christian faith can be described as a *personal* and *intimate* relationship with God in the 'heart' of the human believer, versus a dry rule-governed legalistic and judgmental religion (arguably an idol and huge defense mechanism in the modern world), and that the word heart is spoken of hundreds of times in the Bible, it is necessary to provide some explanation of this term. In a little known and arguably neglected book, *Biblical Psychology*[14], Oswald Chambers provides some clarity on the spiritual nature of the human heart, which he calls the 'radiator of the personal life' - the source of human identity and moral reasoning:

> 'The use of the Bible term 'heart' is best understood by simply saying 'me'. The heart is not merely the seat of the affections, it is the centre of everything. The heart is the central altar, and the body is the outer court. What we offer on the altar of the heart will tell ultimately through the extremities of the body…the centre from which God's working and the devil's working, the centre from which everything works which moulds the human mechanism…Our Lord undertakes to fill the whole region of the heart with light and holiness … (2 Corinthians. 4: 6) ... Do I realize that I need it done? Or do I think I can realize myself? That is the great phrase today, and it is growing in popularity - 'I must realize myself''.

[7] 'I must realize *myself*'? Indeed, Chambers' reflections from the early 20th century are, I would argue, prophetic for the age in which we live. The cultural ethos of 'self-realization', or what has been called 'selfism' by psychologist Paul Vitz,[15] is so encultured in the west that I agree with those who have argued that pride of the heart 'is now synonymous with virtue' in the institutions of media, sport and religion.[16] To be sure, this view of identity and self-worth that has no objective foundation, as it is relative to each person, is so deeply woven into the fabric of society, that it is, as the 19th century writer Kierkegaard states, the worst form of despair, a 'fictitious health'.[17] Why? Because it is, as Kierkegaard called it, the disposition of the 'automatic cultural man' an *unconscious*

denial of the reality of life built on *self*, instead of the source of our being, a Holy loving God. This idea is not new and supports the maxim, 'read an old book for a new idea'!

[8] As articulated in the writings of St. Augustine, Kierkegaard, Dostoyevsky, Oswald Chambers, G.K. Chesterton and C.S. Lewis and of course the fountain of all their musings, the Bible, the insidiousness of pride and narcissism in the west's cultural value system has resulted in widespread cultural and social fragmentation. This is, in part, a consequence of the liberalization of ethics and the 'human potential' movement (e.g., Esalen Institute) in America. The titles of notable books such as *The Culture of Narcissism*: *Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (1980), *Psychology as Religion*: *The Cult of Self-Worship* (1994) and Ernest Becker's award winning *The Denial of Death* (1973),[18] also accurately convey our current situation. Nonetheless, liberal-humanist and post-modern voices that dominate academic sports studies (e.g., sociology, philosophy, psychology, pedagogy) and other disciplines, at times seem oblivious to the evidence all around them that the 19th and 20th century utopian 'myths of progress' have been unable to prevent, and have often contributed to, what David Blankenhorn, and many others in theology and sport and leisure studies[19] have accurately called a *Fatherless Generation*.

[9] A principal aim of this paper is to suggest that the foundational answer to this problem lies in individuals, communities and nations coming into a knowledge and personal revelation of the love of a Father God. To achieve any clear understanding of individual human identity from this perspective, I must also examine the dominant characteristics (identity) of the society and culture in which individual identity is formed—enculturation. For as Phil Night, founder and chairperson of *Nike* states, sports arguably 'define the culture of the world'[20].

[10] After providing a rationale for the need of this study, my first task is to analyze the conceptual nature of sports competition and its role in understanding 'athletic identity', which has been defined as 'the degree to which an individual identifies with the athlete role'[21]. This will allow for a theological and psychological analysis of identity in sport, focusing on pride, humility and idolatry. Pride and humility are the two states of heart that I see as fundamental in understanding both positive and negative aspects of identity in sport. I will then provide extended *Concluding Remarks* due to the embryonic nature of the study of identity in sport from a Christian perspective and some suggestions for future empirical research and scholarship and a range of resources to assist in this process.

Identity and Competition in Sport

[11] In his book *Winning*: *The Psychology of Competition*[22], Stuart Walker makes a number of points about athletic competition, which are important when examining issues of identity in sport:

> 'Most competitors think of themselves as being primarily motivated to develop, demonstrate, and enjoy competence. Many, however, are also concerned with the demonstration of power, courage, and aggressiveness. They use competition to overcome feelings of dependence, helplessness, and loss of individuality. Others are more concerned with being approved, appreciated, and admired. They use competition to overcome feelings of being separated, abandoned, and unloved. Competition permits the demonstration of individual significance, which gratifies desire for both assertiveness and approval. The key word is "demonstration." Competitors perform in public; they assert themselves in the presence of others - of their competitors at the very least'.

[12] Walker's psychological thesis holds some weight, however as Newman[23] notes, Walker overstates his point as to how competitions are primarily activated, i.e., winning is the only goal of the athlete. This thesis is far too simplistic and I would agree with Simon[24], who notes that competition in sport is ethically defensible and that the 'meeting

of the demands athletes place upon their talents often involves beauty, courage, dedication, and passion'. Nonetheless, the intense emotion and passion often present in the delicately balanced dialectic of competitive sport, Hyland[25] suggests, also carries the risk that 'such intensity will devolve into alienation and violence'. This is closely tied to athletes' (and coaches', parents' etc.) need for recognition, love and demonstrating power and significance, which is conveyed by Walker and is arguably one mainstay of modern competitive sport.

[13] A psychoanalytical perspective of these needs in competitive sport, Kohn[26] suggests, would basically run something like: winning = coach's approval = parental acceptance [in child/youth sport] = acceptance of self (self worth). In extending Kohn's social-psychological analysis to include the spiritual, this unhealthy 'disordering of our affections', as church father St. Augustine (354-430c.) put it, may lead to perversion and corruption of the activity in which 'the athlete may delude himself into thinking that his own quest for wealth and fame, or even a championship, will make him happy'.[27] In other words, for athletes and coaches of this mindset it would seem that 'sport *is* life'[28] and to lose, or be unable to play for whatever the reason, can have catastrophic consequences for the emotional and psychological balance of an individual; that is, their identity.

[14] England Rugby Union World Cup star, Johnny Wilkinson, has recently confessed the underlying reason for the 'near destruction of his career - an obsessive quest for perfection'[29]. This is something that is acutely conveyed in the title of his recent biography, *Tackling Life*: *Striving for Perfection* (2008)[30]. In light of the 'win-at-all-costs' ethic, reflect on Wilkinson's very honest and illustrative comments about his injuries, the meaning of rugby for him and how this has impacted upon his psychological well-being and understanding of *life itself*:

> ‘The truth is that I was wracked with anxiety, almost constantly. I wanted it [to achieve] so badly that I was beating myself up. It was the same whether I played for Newcastle, England or the Lions. Before the game it was nerves. After the game it was a harsh post-mortem - why did I miss that tackle? Why did I miss that conversion? … All the intensity and attrition brought with it intense fatigue. That resulted in injuries which, in turn, have resulted in a lot of pain and anguish … You hear yourself saying only good things will come of this, that there’s a reason for it and you’ve saved yourself for two years of being battered but none of it is really true … I would have given anything to have played consistently … There have been times when it’s been hugely painful. I’ve been incredibly depressed, demoralised, even bitter … I feel as if I’ve let myself down then, because it’s all about setting benchmarks as a person and there have been times when I’ve failed to reach these marks. It has made me lose my way in so far as all my life I’ve done nothing but think and play rugby. When it’s taken away from you for as long as it has been, it makes you unsure over what you’re supposed to do with your life’.[31]

[15] Interestingly, Wilkinson’s emotional rollercoaster following a catalogue of injuries since his moment of glory with that famous drop-kick in the dying seconds of the 2003 Rugby World Cup Final (Sydney), has led *Times* journalist, Souster[32], to suggest that he has now undergone an almost ‘… spiritual change’. Arguably, Wilkinson has experienced what the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber called a ‘shudder of identity’[33], that is, one of the primary sources of meaning in *life* has been removed and he is searching his soul for purpose and meaning. Ruben[34] captures something of this in stating that for ‘many strong competitors, upon reaching the summit of their aspirations … the discovery, ultimately, that “making it” is often a hollow gain, is one of the most traumatic events that the successful can experience’. Along with many others, Wilkinson has encountered the existential angst, fear and sense of worthlessness that often accompanies the loss of a significant ‘life project’ (Sartre)[35] like sport, what cultural anthropologist, Ernest Becker, [36]aptly describes as the ‘dread of insignificance’. This anxiety and sense of worthlessness is likely to be more intense for professional full-time athletes[37] such as Wilkinson, in comparison to amateurs due to the greater time, significance, meaning and ultimately sense of identity invested in sport, a ‘life project’.

[16] Sad stories of retired athletes, for example British soccer players from the 1980s and early 1990s in particular, sliding into alcoholism and suffering from serious relationship problems (e.g., divorce) illustrate the potentially catastrophic identity issues that can ensue when sport, the 'life project', is lost.[38] The poignant and yet often failed and embarrassing 'comebacks' of professional athletes at the end of their careers, is another example of how sport can become an 'unhealthy obsession'. The 'old pro' is unable to let go of their sporting life in an anxious quest to hold onto a major source of their identity in *life*. Evidence of this existential angst in elite and youth sport performers has been shown in research on dispositional neurotic perfectionism, 'fear of failure', psychiatric writings on the mental health of athletes and theological and philosophical reflection on shame in sport,[39] with athletes suffering from feelings of narcissism, guilt, shame, negative mood and resultant decrements in performance.

[17] For an athlete in competitive sports, the feeling associated with moving teams, athletic retirement, career-ending injuries and defeat can be great and is often the precursor to feelings of loss and neurotic anxiety, and in some cases what consultant sport psychiatrist Robert Burton classifies as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PSTD).[40] Indeed, for some athletes this loss of identity and self-worth associated with these perceived traumatic occurrences in sport, has resulted in clinical depression and occasionally suicide attempts, as was sometimes the case in ancient Greek athletics.[41]

[18] Although this is not a simple correlation, since many other factors determine an athlete's sense of identity, such as sex, personality, race and ethnicity, education, culture, family background and past experience, the physical body, the individual's name and group membership,[42] nevertheless playing and winning equals 'being', and losing equates to 'non-being'. 'Non-being threatens man's self-affirmation' suggests theologian Paul

Tillich.[43] In the athletic arena this may lead to a sense of unworthiness and insecurity in the athlete when they lose, or fail to come up to the often unrealistic and unhealthy expectations of pushy coaches, parents and even nations.

[19] Though by definition, these losses are simply a temporal evaluation, ask any athlete or coach and, if honest, they will admit that at times they allow their performance to define their being and so for them a *loss* is tantamount to defeat or failure (symbolic death) as a person. This is what sport psychologists call the 'hero-to-zero' syndrome. In discussing the loss and sorrow of losing in competitive sport, Higgs and Braswell use 'the term "pseudo-sorrow" to express the emotional state of losers' and state that 'real sorrow lives in hospitals and in funeral homes and indeed ordinary homes without number'.[44] While of course there is very real suffering in sport that can be a mix of physical, mental and spiritual[45], this again conveys how sport has become for many in the west an idol that is intimately tied to the identity and self-worth of athletes and fans. I am not suggesting that athletes should not passionately care about sport and become emotionally involved. This is in part what makes sport participation and competition so exciting, fulfilling and healthy.

[20] In support of Hochstetler, Hopsicker and Kretchmar's holistic conception of sport,[46] neither do I advocate a dualistic worldview in which 'real sorrow' only exists in 'real life' outside of sport. I hold firmly to a biblical, Pauline and ultimately Jewish anthropology - mind, body and spirit are viewed as *one* (*nephesh*) - supporting the notion that our experience of suffering, loss, joy and sorrow, is valid in all of life's diverse situations and messiness.[47] However, if 'post-match blues' slide into prolonged self-pity, moods and depression that affects the athlete and is *projected* on to others, then arguably, sport has become an idol. The destructive consequences of the 'win-at-all-costs' ethic of modern

sport (especially on individual identity) has been examined in more detail elsewhere[48] and is also prevalent in organized child and youth sport that reflects trends in professional adult sport.

[21] A wealth of studies and writings exist that have documented the negative and worrying trends in elite child and youth sport development strategies and grass-roots sport policy, which are linked to the cultural ethos of winning-at-all-costs. I would argue the most comprehensive analysis of this endemic problem is Paulo David's important book, *Human Rights in Youth Sport*: *A Critical Review of Children's rights in Competitive Sports*[49] that covers areas such as overtraining, eating disorders, physical and mental burnout, elite youth sport programs and the negative effect of parental pressure and expectations.

[22] Instead of viewing competition as a healthy test or mutual striving toward excellence, the etymological root of the term,[50] or as a *playful* form of developmental recreation, it has become to some degree a questioning of the athlete's or child's/youth's very existence and their source of self-worth. This has been clearly articulated by religious studies scholar, Michael Grimshaw,[51] in his analysis of the idolatrous nature of modern sport, in which he argues a 'pagan mythology of fallible gods' has evolved. To be sure, for many participants and spectators modern sport is a religion in the ritualistic and functional sense, with many similarities evident between the practice and rituals of modern sport and religion.[52]

[23] For the elite athlete, winning in sport is then frequently inflated to a form of immortality[53] and thus idolatry, resulting in the individual seeking to justify the meaning of their existence through their sport participation. The complex and differing motivations *of heart* to succeed, in the 1924 Olympic Games, shown by Harold Abrahams and Eric

Liddle, is beautifully portrayed in the award winning film, *Chariots of Fire*, and is a good example of this. As Cashmore has noted in his socio-historical analysis of the film, Abrahams '... individualistic, self-interested approach to competition … is … entirely congruent with the 'win-at-all-costs' mentality that was to become prevalent in [modern] sport'.[54] From a Christian perspective, glorification of the *self* in any human endeavor, as was arguably *one* motivation of Harold Abrahams in this film, is rooted in the sin of pride, the 'complete anti-God state of heart', according to C.S. Lewis.[55]

The Role of Pride and Humility in Sporting Identity

[24] Sporting tales, as those described above, illustrate how the ego of the athlete can predominate in a quest to win and ultimately to appear and feel superior or even god-like, which when you consider Harold Abrahams words and the boasts of modern athletes together with the explicit worship of modern sports stars in the media and their institutionalization in Halls of Fame, I would argue is not an exaggeration for some. Drawing on excerpts from Schneider's theology of personhood and his criticisms of Sartre's atheism, Pannenberg[56] articulates this clearly:

> 'To the extent that human beings try to gain their wholeness and strive to be "in and for themselves," they are always a "desire to be God" … Thus the striving for the self-realization that is directed toward the wholeness of one's being is in fact to be understood as an expression of sin, of the will "to be like God"'.

[25] From a psychological standpoint, this can be understood as the athlete, coach, sporting parent (vicariously) needing to attain 'self-actualization'[57] through worldly success, adulation and affirmation in competition and their career. Van Kaam[58] in his incisive assessment of modern psychology and modern culture, points to this, in suggesting that 'an overemphasis on introspective attitudes has seriously hindered the spiritual growth of western man … we are ego-centered, when we should be God-

centered'. In support of Van Kaam and the reflections of the theologian Pannenberg, psychologist, Paul Vitz concludes in his trenchant critique of humanistic and atheistic-existential psychology - the work of Jung, Rogers, Fromm and Maslow - that the 'relentless and single-minded search for and glorification of the self…is at direct cross-purposes with the Christian injunction to lose the self'.[59] Lose the *self* in an age of success?

[26] By modern *worldly standards* of success, *Jesus Christ was the greatest failure in human history*, something that was clearly prophesied in the writings of the Old Testament prophet Isaiah, seven hundred years before his birth. To be sure, the Christian story does not portray Jesus as a 'self-actualizer'! No, the Christian narrative records that he '... made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death on a cross!' (Philippians 2: 7-8). The gospels (trans. *Greek,* good news) in the New Testament, which are both prophetic and historical documents, state that from the time Jesus 'set his face to go to Jerusalem' after his wrestling with his calling and destiny in the garden of Gethsemane, the words of Isaiah the prophet began to be fulfilled:

> 'He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering....he was despised and we esteemed him not...surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows....he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed...he was oppressed and afflicted yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter...Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer...the Lord makes his life a guilt offering...after the suffering of his soul he will see the light of life....'
>
> (Isaiah 53)[60]

[27] Why did Jesus have to tread the path that theologian Timothy Savage notes, is a ''strange' and 'alien' glory anticipated by ... Isaiah, a light revealed in the darkness of death, a splendour manifested in the most appalling object of antiquity - a cross'?[61]

Indeed, the blood-soaked cross paradoxically speaks of reconciliation, light and love, as personified in Jesus himself being described as the 'light of the world' in the prologue to John's gospel. The purpose of Jesus Christ's sacrifice, as described in Christian thought, was to reconcile his Father's creatures (humans) back into an intimate relationship with himself: *at-one-ment*. Theologians call this the 'atonement' and contend that all three dimensions of the trinity, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, are involved in the process[62] and that it is the path to eternal life, deep joy and a 'peace ... which transcends all understanding' (Philippians 4: 7a; Isaiah. 26: 3) regardless of earth's circumstances. This is clearly described in an oft-cited bible verse …

> 'For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life' (John 3: 16)

[28] Commenting on the meaning of the atonement for individual identity, the priest-psychologist, Adrian Van Kaam[63] notes that 'an infinite love tenderly called me forth out of nowhere and nothingness; an unspeakable Love emptied itself to redeem the identity that I lost sight of in sinfulness; an enlightening Love keeps calling me back to what I am'. Herein lies the paradox of the Christian faith, articulated by C.S Lewis in that 'the more we let God take us over, the more truly ourselves we become - because he made … it is when I turn to Christ, when I give up myself to His personality, that I first begin to have a personality of my own',[64] in all domains of life, including sport.

[29] Following this central biblical theme of surrender to Christ - 'If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation' (2 Corinthians 5: 17) - it is then the relationship in the heart of the Christian believer with a Father God, through the third person of the trinity, the Holy Spirit, that Christians believe 'guards' their 'hearts and minds in Christ Jesus' (Philippians 4: 7b). Coherent with the Christian anthropology laid out in my introduction the heart is

then understood as the seat of all wrong or right feeling, thinking and behaving, and thus is the foundational source of human identity in all of life's activities, including sport. Considering that the Psalmist (51: 17) states that it is 'a broken and contrite heart ...' that allows for an intimate relationship with God, how does this fit with a modern understanding of Christianity in the west, and conceptions of identity in sport?

[30] The Reverend Mark Townsend's words in his recent thought-provoking book, *The Gospel of Falling Down*: *The Beauty of Failure in an Age of Success*,[65] conveys a realistic picture of the god-man who walked the earth two thousand years ago and the religion he expressed:

> 'Failure, rather than success, is at the heart of the life of Jesus and his message. He came to liberate us from the "gospel of success". It is not in "climbing the ladder of perfection" [i.e., maladaptive perfectionism] that we meet God, but in falling from it. And it is then that we discover the most beautiful spiritual gold ... The Gospel is not about *success* ... To make the Gospel into a means of being successful is to seriously miss the point. We live in a success-dominated world, and much of the (especially Western) Church has become a success-dominated religion. What is the central symbolic image for the Christian faith? It's a cross of wood, with a figure of a man nailed to it – a naked, bleeding man. A man so wounded, so humiliated, so crushed that one can barely imagine...'.

Therefore, as Clements and Savage have articulated, it is through a journey of weakness (*not* in character), brokenness, vulnerability and sacrificial love that Jesus went to the cross, and it is believed by Christians, resurrected by his Father - the event on which the Christian story stands or falls.[66] Interestingly then, consultant sport psychiatrist, Dr Daniel Begel, who has worked with amateur and professional American sports teams, elucidates how thoughts of 'weakness and vulnerability' in modern sport are often diametrically opposed to the identity of the modern athlete:[67]

> 'If there is any character trait that is anathema to an athlete it is that of weakness. Being unable to handle one's feelings, and confessing that inability to another

> human being in intimate conversation, is not usually concordant with an athlete's sense of mastery...the role of professional athlete may increase the risk of suffering a specific narcissistic vulnerability, and retirement from sports at any level carries with it an increased risk of clinical depression, especially if the retirement is forced by injury, or waning abilities ...'.

[31] Not to be misinterpreted at this juncture in my argument, achievement and excellence, strength of character and body and success in sport, is *not* at all antithetical to the Christian way of life. But it can be dangerous, because of the proud and self-reliant ethos of western culture that dominates big-business professional sport, which is often but certainly not always, characterized by individualism, vain-glory and ultimately pride of the heart.[68] Pride of the heart is what C.S. Lewis and professor of pastoral psychology, Donald Capps,[69] calls 'the great sin' and is the root of most other sins, which are arguably prevalent in modern sport, such as greed, vanity and self-glorification.

[32] Both Lewis and Capps are, however, balanced in their reflections on pride, emphasizing that there are positive and negative forms of pride. For example in sport, having a sense of one's own self-worth and dignity in performance as an athlete or coach, taking pleasure in being praised by parents, coaches, fans and team-mates and satisfaction in one's sporting achievements, are all examples of pride in a positive sense. This said, it has been argued, and I agree, that pride 'is now synonymous with virtue' in the institutions of sport, religion and the media.[70] According to Christian scripture, 'life projects' like sport, can then easily become idols that blind people to deeper spiritual truths about 'who they are' - their identity - and what is *ultimately* important in life.

[33] C.S Lewis unwittingly provided a sound theoretical basis for analyzing identity in sport from a Christian theological perspective.[71] If pride, as Lewis[72] suggests, 'is *essentially* competitive above all other vices' how does this specifically relate to understanding identity in sport? The findings of Stevenson's qualitative investigation of

the culture of elite sport and the moral dilemmas this raises for Christian athletes,[73] sheds some light on this. One participant comments, 'It's weird. I just couldn't let go of not winning. If we lost, I just couldn't let it go for a week - it would, like, boil inside me'. Another participant states, 'I think there's times when … as an athlete, when we're excelling to become our best … [that] we lose sight of everything [else] around us'.

[34] Stevenson concludes that 'these athletes struggled with the overwhelming priority placed on winning in the contemporary sport culture' that 'led to a number of consequences with which they were uncomfortable'.[74] Clearly, organized child and youth sports are also a major vehicle for this cultural ethos and its subsequent problems. 'In childhood, the discovery of athletic talent may determine a person's role within the family and identity within society in significant, if not always salutary, ways', suggests sport psychiatrist, Begel.[75] It seems that the centrifugal forces that act upon and within the microcosm of sport are difficult to step outside of.

[35] Thomas á Kempis (1380-1471c.), in his well-known devotional work, *The Imitation of Christ*,[76] advises that 'no man can live in the public eye without risk to his soul'. Christian teaching suggests that the 'weapons' and source of 'power' with which humans (modern athletes) can combat their prideful human nature that will cause them to desire recognition, seek vain-praise and glory and act in a manner that will possibly lead to the alienation of others (opponents and family etc.), are love and humility from surrendering to God. As Capps has observed 'pride is also a form of *isolation* … and personal bondage … because it is a form of self-love in which we deny our need for community with others'.[77] Humility is the virtue directly opposite the sin of pride that leads to alienation and isolation, which Lewis[78] contends is the 'complete anti-god state of mind', and which had its genesis in the fall from grace of some of God's angelic realm and

humanity. From this point in world history, in every dimension of life including sport, Andrew Murray[79] suggests that 'pride and humility are the two master powers - the two kingdoms at war' in our hearts, which will determine our feelings, thoughts and actions in the heat of sporting competition.

Concluding Reflections

[36] The aim of this paper was to provide a psychological and theological analysis of identity in sport while also acknowledging the importance of social, cultural and historical forces in identity formation. Following others, I have argued that as a 'moulder and reflection of 20th century attitudes towards human nature',[80] modern psychology (and sport psychology) that is largely characterized by individualism, humanism, positivism and a relativist epistemology, is diametrically opposed to Christian psychology (especially anthropology and ontology). As Oswald Chambers suggests, '… Christian psychology is not the study of human nature Christianised, but the endeavour to understand the wonder and the mystery of "Christ in you, the hope of glory"'.[81] Nonetheless, I also heartily support Dallas Willard,[82] who wisely notes that 'psychological and theological understanding of the spiritual life must go hand in hand. Neither of them is complete without the other'. Therefore, in any comprehensive study of identity in sport, both empirical and theoretical research in sport psychology, on areas such as 'athletic identity' (e.g., Athletic Identity Measurement Scale) motivational theory, human development models (e.g., Erikson), forms of psychological abnormality and mechanisms of the brain must be synthesized with sound theology and biblical anthropology.

[37] In particular, I would emphasize the accuracy of the anthropological starting point when studying identity in sport from a Christian perspective, in that 'the image of God in

the New Testament reflects a theological and philosophical struggle with some of the most important questions of human existence. Who are we as humans, and to whom do we ultimately belong?'.[83] In trying to answer these questions in sport, scholars should carefully examine both Hebrew and Christian anthropology[84] when deciding how they should respond to the tenets of modern psychology, so that, as Johnson (1997) in pointing to the bible stresses, they are not taken '… captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than Christ.'(Colossians 2: 8) - humanism, secularism, nihilism and selfishness. For those wishing to examine issues of identity in sport from a Christian standpoint there are a number of useful non-sport sources in the psycho-theological literature and writings on the 'Fatherhood of God',[85] which I have argued is central to understanding Christian identity in sport.

[38] Although previous writings specifically on athletic identity in the sports literature are sparse, the work of scholar Ashley Null, sport psychologist Mark Nesti and analyses of idolatry in sport, should all be of use in grasping the psychological and theological complexities of identity in the sports realm.[86] Following the mapping of the human genome at the turn of the 20th century and the valuable but primarily humanistic analyses of genetic enhancement in sport,[87] theological analyses are crucial in assessing the wider implications of being able to interfering with the make-up (anthropology) of human-beings.[88] Exploration of how states of heart, such as pride and humility, impact upon moral reasoning[89] and relationships in sport, is another important area to explore, for as C.S. Lewis has suggested, 'pride has been the chief cause of misery in every nation and every family since the world began … pride means enmity - it *is* enmity'.[90] A prideful heart that seeks personal glory, gain and self-worth primarily in sporting success, will often alienate and disregard others, leading to the damage and breakdown of relationships.

The role of shame and guilt in this process, which often leads to *striving* for personal glory and self-worth in sport and to the alienation of others, is a related area for further enquiry.[91]

[39] Research on how identity may impact upon sports leadership models from a Christian worldview is also needed. The concept of *Servant Leadership* described in Rieke, Hammermeister and Chase's empirical study of basketball coaches, a qualitative investigation by MacDonald and Kirk on Christian identity in health and physical education teachers and the legendary reflections of 'Coach Wooden', all provide a foundation for this.[92]

[40] To develop past thought-provoking work on identity in disability sport[93] from a Christian stance, researchers could build on the exploratory theological work of Watson, Watts and Parker and Watts,[94] by examining existential meaning and spirituality in athletes with physical and intellectual disabilities. What does physical movement through sporting activities mean, if anything, for those with profound intellectual disabilities? How does participation in sport impact on the identity of those with physical disabilities and how, if at all, could this have spiritual meaning? How do individuals in a society bound to a dominant worldview of competition, physical competence (e.g., able-bodied Olympics), rationality and intellectualism, respond to the broken minds of those with profound intellectual disabilities, that can't be fully 'understood', 'fixed' or 'cured'?

[41] Commenting on the theme of my last question, Graeme Watts[95] draws on the provocative suggestion of Wolf Wolfensberger[96] that people with an intellectual disability may have actually been chosen by God to be the prophets of our age - an age in which many seek to win-at-all-costs, to appear competent to 'have it all together'. Watts observes

that Wolfensberger may be making this case with more than a touch of hyperbole but argues that in promoting values opposite to those so tightly held as 'normal', it is perhaps the obviously limited capacity of those with an intellectual disability which acts as a reminder that to be human also includes those who are dependent and fall short of generally held ideals. In this context I would also agree with Stanley Hauerwas'[97] assertion that those with profound disabilities often '… remind us of the limits of our power, and we do not like those who remind us', something that has perhaps significantly affected the Church's limited theological reflection on disability. Further study in this area may help 'self-reliant' westerners to consider life's purpose, which of course includes the meaning and purpose in sports and accurate conceptions of humility.

[42] Some sections of the Church have historically had a false view of humility, in which God-given gifts, talents and desires of the heart have been de-emphasized and shunned '...under the guise of *devotion to Christ*'.[98] Following Bill Johnson, I would argue this is not an accurate portrayal of Christian life, in which creativity, joy and excellence should, where possible, be sought in all domains of life, including sport. I also wholeheartedly support some of the conclusions of Smart,[99] in his comprehensive analysis of *The Sport Star … Sporting Celebrity*: 'the achievements of high profile professional sporting figures posses a quality that is increasingly rare in a world made cynical (corruption in sport) ... the excitement and emotion aroused by the uncertainty of sporting encounters ... the pleasure derived, and frequently collectively shared ... as a spectator or viewer'. In this vein, through analyzing Karl Barth's work on the famous composer, Wolfgang Amadaeus Mozart and his appreciation of Mozart's playful creativity and expression of his musical gift *in* the world, Metzger[100] reminds us that the Christian God delights in his creatures being ...

> '... creative within human culture ... to give glory to God by simply being ... by *simply* working or playing, one glorifies God ... God is glorified in the very imaginative and enterprising acts of human creation and recreation. Before God, there is room for free play'.

[43] Beginning with the seminal work of Dutch historian Johan Huizinga and followed by reflections from theologians and sport philosophers,[101] this playful, aesthetic and creative dimension of life that is often seen in sport, has been well-documented. It seems to most readily manifest itself in fun 'pick-up games' and when sport competition is played in the spirit of a 'mutual stringing together for excellence', the etymological root meaning of the term, competition.[102] In the modern era, the men's 2008 Wimbledon Tennis final (and the 2009 Australian Open final) between Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal was perhaps, an example of this. The TV commentator and ex-British number one tennis player, Andrew Castle, said of this exciting and passionate dual between two men at the height of excellence in the field, that it was not solely a demonstration of great tennis but an advert for the value and beauty of sport *itself* - it had a transcendent dimension (my paraphrase). There seemed to be a deep mutual respect between the Spaniard (Nadal) and the Swiss (Federer) and a form of humility that ironically is often only witnessed in those at the very peak of their field, in this case sport. Because, from a humanist's standpoint, they are secure (if with a degree of fragility, perhaps), in who they are and confident in *their* abilities, their *selves*.

[44] Sport itself could then be argued to possess a spiritual dimension, in that it seems to provide opportunity akin to what the sociologist of religion, Peter Berger,[103] called 'signals of transcendence … within the human condition'. Indeed, the great 19th century Russian novelist, Dostoyevsky,[104] was not ignorant to the fact that 'the universal and everlasting craving of humanity' is 'to find someone to worship' and in the sporting realm it is perhaps these 'moments of transcendence' and aesthetic beauty (amongst many other

'earthy' things), and the sporting demi-gods who provide them, that fit the bill. There is, however, a real danger in this quasi-transcendent understanding of life and sport, as poetically described by C.S. Lewis:

> 'The books or the music [and sporting moments] in which we thought the beauty was located will betray us if we trust to them; it was not *in* them, it only came *through* them, and what came through them was longing. These things - the beauty, the memory of our own past - are good images of what we really desire; but if they are mistaken for the thing itself they turn into dumb idols, breaking the hearts of their worshippers. For they are not the thing in itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from another country we have never visited … Our lifelong nostalgia, our longing to be reunited with something in the universe from which we now feel cut off … is no mere neurotic fancy, but the truest index of our real situation'.[105]

[45] Our 'real' situation? In his analysis of the idol-pride interface in the human heart, in both Augustine's autobiography, *Confessions*, and his most well-known theological work, *The City of God*, Reno concludes that '… we wrap our love of worldly things in this false tinsel of divinity and propose them to ourselves as idols worthy of worship. This strategy of self-deception allows us to pursue the finite goods of creaturely life as if they were images of the divine'.[106] Similarly, when describing human's often unconscious yearning for eternity, Van Kaam suggests, this leads to seeking '… something lasting amidst the transitoriness of countless self-expressions'.[107]

[46] It is argued that sport, could just be one such 'transitory self-expression' among many others, *if* it is an idolatrous quest and thus may lead to self-deception as to the deeper spiritual meaning of life. As C.S. Lewis contends above, if a human-being takes a 'life-project' like sport, which Christians believe is a gift from God, but mistake it '… for the thing itself they turn into dumb idols, breaking the hearts of their worshippers'. History shows that human-beings begin to consider and commit to religious faith for a whole range of reasons, nonetheless, it is quite often only when there is, as the Jewish

philosopher Martin Buber called it, a 'shudder of identity',[108] when the pride and self-sufficiency of the human heart (*not* character) has been 'weakened', or what Wolfensburger[109] calls 'gentled', through an athlete's life - retirement, career-ending injury, or failure - that the deep religious-existential question might be asked: who am I without *my* abilities, *my* source of self-worth, *my* importance and status in the media, sporting sub-culture and world?

[47] This said, I do not want to propose a false dichotomy in this broken and messy world and I emphasize again, personal excellence, aesthetic beauty, creativity and human achievement should be sought in all walks of life, including sport. Nelson Mandela, in his inaugural presidential speech, conveys something of this …

> 'Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant … talented …? Actually, who are you *not* to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small doesn't serve the world. There is nothing enlightening about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you [false humility]. We were born to manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others'.[110]

[48] To be sure, such inspirational words resonate deep into all our hearts but I challenge the reader to consider where this inspiration and motivation comes from? The catholic priest-psychologist, Adrian Van Kaam, I would argue was writing prophetically in 1975, when he observed that 'we are on the rebirth of the awareness of human need for the transcendent …'.[111] The following two quotes I then believe can *both* be true, if we '… seek first his kingdom and his righteousness' (Matthew 6: 33). A recent newspaper advertisement for *Gillette*[112] that features three of the sporting world's demi-gods, Tiger Woods (until recently), Roger Federer and Thierry Henry, encourages the reader to:

‘Show the world how phenomenal you can be’.

In the gospels, the founder and cornerstone of Christianity, Jesus of Nazareth, a humble carpenter and who Christians believe to be the son of God, encourages the reader to consider where this talent came from and what *ultimately* matters …

> ‘If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever loses his life for me will find it. What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?’
>
> Matthew 16: 24-26

Acknowledgements

Major sections of this paper are taken from a significantly longer book chapter: Watson, N.J. (2011) Identity in Sport: A Psychological and Theological Analysis, in J. Parry., Nesti, M., and Watson, N.J. (2011) *Theology, Ethics and Transcendence in Sports* (Foreword Robert Higgs), London, UK: Routledge: 107-148. I would like to thank Professor Drew Gibson (Union Theological College, Belfast, N Ireland) Professor Scott Kretchmar (Penn State University, USA) and Professor Andrew Parker (University of Gloucester, UK), for their most insightful comments on my first draft. I would also like to thank Dr Chris Bell and Kath Watson for their invaluable help in proofreading this work.

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Notes

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