

## Article

# Youth, Sport, and Faith: Identity Formation in High School Athletes

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**Abstract:** It is widely accepted that the transition from youth to adulthood in western industrialized societies brings with it a series of tensions and dilemmas in terms of identity formation. One of the areas where such formational issues often manifest themselves is through the faith journeys of young people. This paper presents empirical evidence from a small-scale qualitative study of one faith–sport initiative—*Run the Race Well*—a US-based venture which, through an annual retreat program, aims to provide theological support for high school athletes involved in the higher echelons of sport in their age group. Utilizing the “voices” of retreat participants, the paper uncovers some of the issues surrounding the Christian identity of the young people who have participated in the program and explores how the prioritization of lifestyle activities (e.g., education, sport, and faith) has the potential to give rise to particular problems and anxieties. The paper discusses some of the complexities of this prioritization process to reveal how young people seek to navigate and negotiate their identities, both as elite athletes and Christians, and how the tensions and dilemmas of teenage life shape their views of the overall relationship between sport and faith. The paper concludes by suggesting that amidst the wider anxieties of youth transition, intentional investment by others (via theological teaching, sports coaching, and one-to-one, group, and peer mentoring) can provide a catalyst for identity formation and personal/faith development.

**Keywords:** youth; elite sport; Christianity; high school athletes; qualitative research



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## 1. Introduction

It is widely accepted that the transition from youth to adulthood in western industrialized societies brings with it a series of tensions and dilemmas in terms of identity formation. One of the areas where such formational issues often manifest themselves is through the faith journeys of young people (Hoven 2016; Livingston 2019, 2020; Proios 2017; Smith and Denton 2005). This paper presents empirical findings from a small-scale qualitative study of one faith–sport initiative—*Run the Race Well*—a US-based venture which, through an annual retreat program, aims to provide support for high school athletes involved in the higher echelons of sport in their age group. A central aim of the paper is to uncover some of the issues surrounding the Christian identity of the young athletes concerned and to explore how retreat-based teaching and one-to-one, group, and peer mentoring might provide a catalyst for identity formation and personal/faith development.

As a popular cultural phenomenon, sport holds significant allure and kudos, and technological developments in recent years have served only to intensify this position via the ubiquitous circulation of sporting imagery. Religious studies scholars and theologians exploring the intersections between religion (especially Christianity) and broader spheres of social life have certainly acknowledged the significance of sport as a popular cultural activity (see, for example, Moore 2003; Price 2001; Ellis 2014; Harvey 2014; Scholes and Sassower 2014). One view is that sport has become a religion in and of itself and that its

rituals and practices help fill a spiritual void in Western culture. Indeed, amidst the highly commercialized world of sport media, it has been argued that some sporting figures have come to embody “god-like” status (see, for example, Meyer and Watson 2014). The more recent emergence of the Christian sporting celebrity appears to have brought an additional layer of analytical complexity to this scenario (see Feezell 2013; Newman 2010; Rial 2012; Parker and Watson 2015).

In the US at least, elite sporting participation at the high school level often fosters more immediate aspirations around scholarship opportunities and collegiate athletics programs (see Hatteberg 2020; Martin et al. 2017). Within this highly competitive context, young people can find themselves under significant pressure to prioritize sport over education and wider lifestyle activities such as church and faith. Utilizing the “voices” of retreat participants, this paper discusses some of the complexities of this prioritization process in order to reveal how one particular cohort of young people sought to navigate and negotiate their identities as both elite athletes and Christians, and how the tensions and dilemmas of teenage life shaped their views of the overall relationship between sport and faith.

## 2. Sport, Youth, and Faith

In their book *Soul-Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, Smith and Denton (2005) argue that for religious teenagers, knowing how to integrate their religious beliefs into ordinary life is a persistent challenge. Indeed, the question of how to relate their faith convictions to their everyday lives can be something that young people rarely get an opportunity to contemplate constructively. Sports are one of the most important cultural phenomena of our time. Approximately 63% of US citizens watch sports (Carroll), and 54.1% of children in the US between 6 and 17 years old participate in organized sports (see Black et al. 2022). Indeed, sports touch numerous dimensions of human life and intersect virtually every social institution, including family, school, business, community, government, and religion.

Smith and Denton (2005) argue that for religious teenagers, sports are significant relational networks which provide institutional ties that vie for their attention, time, and energy.<sup>1</sup> Smith and Denton go on to suggest that the religious commitments of many youth often (and invariably) decrease in importance over time in light of more dominant cultural demands such as sports. In his sociological analysis of 16 declining churches (split evenly between conservative and mainline denominations) and two comparison churches in which there was rapid growth, McMullin (2013, pp. 46–47) reveals that the most cited reason for congregational decline was “competing Sunday activities”, with youth sports activities and schedules cited as the primary obstacle. In separate research, Livingston (2020, pp. 57–58) argues that the sacrifices made for athletic travel commitments can supplant the family schedule and other activities such as church services.

McMullin (2013) found that congregations’ perceptions mattered regarding the supposed secularization of Sunday; some resisted sports as a (spiritual) distraction, while others operated from a more missional mindset which sought to attract, accommodate, and meet this challenge by getting involved as leaders in community sports and/or by offering alternative times for worship services and/or their own brand of sports programming. The specific challenge for either declining or growing churches, where withdrawal or accommodation occurred, was empowering teenagers to know how to navigate the sports–religion dyad in faithful ways.

Hoffman (2010) identifies the source of the sports–faith problem as being due, at least in part, to the neglect of modern-day Christians to think critically and constructively about their commitments to and investment in sports. Looking across various periods in church history, Hoffman (2010, p. 21) notes that “. . . the church has struggled to define its beliefs and practices in relation to the public’s insatiable appetite for sports”. He goes on to argue that Christians today often divorce their off-field Christian lives from their on-field behaviors, with the two falling short of integration. Rather than their Christian faith animating and instructing how they imagine God, self, and others in relation to the

identity-forming practice of sports, their sporting experiences can induct them into ways of imagining and living which can weaken spiritualities. Consequently, their religious convictions do not shape the whole of their lives. Instead, their faith is often seen as entirely separate from (or even irrelevant to) their sporting pursuits.

### 3. Sport, Faith and Values

A further issue that exacerbates the sports–faith problem, is how the dynamics unique to competition “both external sports structures such as rules and penalties and internal [moral] reasoning structures” along with the curious element of the “set aside” aspect of contests can influence and complicate and even frustrate the ability of athletes and coaches to discern “right” from “wrong” in sports (Bredemeier et al. 2003). According to this view, understanding the meaning given to competition is critical when assessing the moral logic of the sportsperson’s actions and attitudes. Their moral reasoning may be challenged by the nature and values of the “win at all costs” ethic which is dominant in sports (see Shafer 2015; Trothen 2018; Watson and White 2007) and, therefore, athletes and coaches may suspend or separate their “real world” moral reasoning from that which exists in sporting contexts (Shields et al. 2015, 2018). This can result in antisocial behaviors such as disrespecting officials, cheating, and/or intentionally injuring others. When sports serve to socialize athletes toward norms of character and action that are counter to everyday living or the logic of the values internal to their Christian faith, athletes may find themselves over-conforming to the values of sport (see Coakley 2007; Hughes and Coakley 1991). In his qualitative study of 13 high school athletes, Hoven (2016) demonstrates how young people in a Catholic school district in one Canadian city (and Christian athletes in particular) faced similar problems in their moral reasoning skills in sports. Hoven (2016, p. 284) found that religious athletes struggled to engage with and connect their faith to their athletics activities, reflecting a sense of compartmentalization. He argues that such a separation of faith from sports is not unusual among young athletes. In such instances, behaviors, values, and practices (e.g., trash-talking and aggressiveness) which are questionable in terms of their faith traditions may become a normalized and legitimate part of in-game strategy. Consequently, Christian athletes may find themselves compromising the Christian convictions that ground the morality of actions in normative principles (deontology) and character (virtue ethics). That said, Hoven’s research (2016) holds out hope that amid such distractions, religious beliefs can counter some of the inherent challenges of sports and connect to and positively inform and impact athlete attitudes and behaviors to align with their Christian worldview.

Investigating such issues from a more faith-based perspective, Granquist (2015) interviewed six Christian youth ministers from a mix of Lutheran congregations in the Twin Cities metropolitan region of Minnesota, with the aim of inquiring about the challenges and opportunities of youth sports. He found that one practical implication of the sports–faith problem, as observed and experienced by all six ministers, was the personal development (physical, social, and psychological) of Christian youth themselves. Respondents articulated how youth, especially preadolescents (sixth through eighth grade, 11–13 years-old), were not able to stand “against the pressures put on them by some coaches and parents”, because they lacked the moral and emotional maturity to do so (p. 346). Granquist goes on to note how, in his view, a fragility of identity made these young people vulnerable to the aspirations of their coaches and parents, many of whom appeared to be chasing their own dreams through the sporting experiences of their young charges.

### 4. Recalibrating the Youth–Sport–Faith Nexus: *Run the Race Well*

Conceptually speaking, the *Run the Race Well* (RRW) program (an initiative of the Faith and Sports Institute at Baylor University, Texas) began as a place to critically examine a series of questions and dilemmas around the youth–sport–faith nexus. To this end, two of the main aims of the program were as follows: (i) to help young people reflect theologically on the positive and negative influences within sporting experiences, and

(ii) to uncover what devoted religious youth want and need in relation to the integration of their sports–faith behaviors and practices.

This first aim explicitly connects theology and ethics (or faith and how to be in the world) in order to avoid what [Smith and Denton \(2005\)](#) call Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD). Two specific tenets of MTD are that God is not particularly or personally involved in human affairs, and that religious living is more about “doing good” as a moral person in that niceness and fairness instruct how individuals comport themselves in their relationships with and to others. [Dean \(2010, p. 34\)](#) refers to this aspect of MTD’s creed as “The Triumph of the ‘Cult of Nice’” which she avows “grows out of our need as a church to be liked and approved”. The focus of RRW was to help youth understand sports and faith as an integrated whole rather than as separate life spheres, in the hope that the relationship between the two can be better understood when placed in dialogue with each other. Both concern what it means to be human, and both are complex. Indeed, it is difficult for even the most seasoned athlete to discern how sports might socialize one toward or away from one’s Christian beliefs. [Dean \(2010\)](#) argues that such an exercise in reflection and deliberation has the potential to provide youth with the necessary theological language to communicate their faith and interpret their everyday life experiences, a process that is vital to Christian formation. In their research designed to understand the shape and influence of religion in the lives of US youth from adolescence into young adulthood, [Smith and Denton \(2005\)](#) found that respondents were inarticulate about how matters of faith related to subjects like sports (see also [Dean 2010](#)). This situation may be compounded by the on-going influence of muscular Christian values in US sports, which often employ rhetoric and justification for sporting participation shaped by an uninformed folk theology in which the primary means of evaluating sports are in terms of its use-value with little to no recognition of a theological and spiritual basis for sports as play (see also [Ladd and Mathisen 1999](#); [Parker et al. 2019](#); [Shafer 2015](#)).

Facilitated by way of in-game sporting scenarios via practical sports “laboratories” (labs) and explored further through teaching and discussion, this first aim sought to cultivate theological competence and cultural literacy by giving young people the theological resources (“tools”) to make their faith meaningful in sports, recognizing and redeeming what is best about sports and challenging that which is problematic. [Granquist \(2015, p. 346\)](#) points out that most of the youth ministers featured in his research saw the need to help students learn to think through the “positives and negatives” of sporting experiences. A central issue for his respondents was that youth leaders (and the church more generally) should learn to address the problem of sports by putting them in a faith formation context where there is care for the whole person, empowering youth to resist the “unhealthy” messages and elements of sports socialization. Developing skills of discernment is critical to this process especially as young people learn how to communicate and integrate their faith into sport as part of public life. Of course, sports do not exist in a social and cultural vacuum, rather they are simply a microcosm of society, mirroring and influencing wider social and moral issues. For this reason, the RRW program sought to equip Christian young people with the spiritual and emotional resources to manage and respond appropriately to the various ways in which their faith values might be challenged through sports.

One particular feature of competition that RRW’s curriculum helps to reimagine is how youth see themselves and others in their mutual quest toward excellence that the nature and purpose of contests can provide ([Simon 2004](#)). In turn, one of the themes that RRW’s program focuses on regarding competition is the virtue of love. Specifically, the basic conviction that we are created from and for love. Firmly knowing who we are can and should free athletes from the trap of comparison and outlooks that dehumanize the opponent as merely an obstacle to be overcome, rather than co-contestants who cooperatively and voluntarily agree to the challenges to play well and by the rules as skills are tested between persons and achievements are measured ([Simon 2004, pp. 17–39](#)). Knowing who we are is discovered and experienced as God’s beloved. Yet, we often have a difficult time living in this truth of God’s love on account of our experiences and social realities. In

sports, especially, we tend to measure our identity and worth based on performance; we act as if we have to earn others' love, and we treat others as if they must do the same for us (see [Null 2004, 2008](#)). Because of God's love for us, we are free to love—ourselves, our teammates, and even our opponents. God's love puts all of our other loves and cultural pursuits in context and in proper order. And we are liberated to participate in sports as givers rather than as takers, opening up the possibility of seeing past the zero-sum logic of sports, since the practice of sports includes a plethora of other values and goods to be enjoyed both in winning and losing.

Another faith consequence of Christianity's teaching on love is how the application of this virtue and other faith values taught at the retreat can bring moral and spiritual reasoning to bear on behavior in sports, which strengthens the possibility of religious youth seeing how their faith standards can match how they ought to live in everyday activities like sports. This is one practical solution to the problem of "bracketed morality", which scholars continue to identify as a concern where the conditions of sports are ripe for moral disengagement ([Kavussanu et al. 2013](#)).

In their research, [Smith and Denton \(2005\)](#) found that what dominated teenagers' beliefs about prayers and spiritual practices was a weakened version of their respective faiths. Taking this one step further, [Smith and Denton \(p. 148\)](#) describe how this caricature of faith was reflected in some of their respondents' sporting experiences, reporting that one young person disclosed that, "Faith is very important, I pray to God to help me with sports and school and stuff and he hasn't let me down yet, so I think it helps you". Here is an example of how beliefs not only shape practices, but practices shape beliefs.

However, existing research concludes not only how prayer helps with sportspersons' athletic life and performance, but also with "overall well-being . . . to encourage a morally sound life" ([Noh and Shahdan 2020, p. 2](#)). This finding informs how the integration of religion and spirituality through faith practices like prayer, holds promise for ways in which parents and youth can discuss how the two can work together in spheres outside of church, and help in the discernment of constructive approaches to offer spiritual support to their identities especially when facing health problems and injuries ([Wiese-Bjornstal et al. 2022](#)). [Dean \(2010, p. 135\)](#) corroborates how encouraging youth to talk about and experience faith increases the likelihood of more religiously devoted teenagers. The RRW program both implicitly and explicitly engages youth in such conversations and spiritual exercises so that spiritual development is associated with sports and not only church attendance. We do not want to lessen the importance of congregational life and how Christian community is formative for youth but, as [Livingston \(2020, p. 58\)](#) points out, when church attendance becomes legalistic it can preclude youth and families from learning the wisdom of balancing life's demands and how to adapt to ever-changing circumstances in life. Allowing time for such struggles at RRW is designed to teach youth how God-talk and living out their faith in experiences like sport can and should frame their callings and roles in other fields of action.

The second aim of the RRW program is to uncover the specific needs of devoted religious youth in relation to the integration of sports–faith behaviors and practices. This active engagement encourages participants to view their faith as "real" within the context of everyday life experience ([Dean 2010](#)). This equates to learning more about their faith by further exploring Christian practices in sports and life, e.g., how confession, friendship, and study, can help one reflect upon vices like pride, addiction, and envy, and nurture Christian virtues like faith, hope, and love. This second aim is also designed to help young people extend and apply Christian behaviors and practices to their sporting experiences and beyond. [Smith and Denton's \(2005\)](#) findings support this goal. They observe that intentional and regular engagement in religious practices were vital to the development of teenagers' faith, and moreover, that it is precisely when ". . . family, school, friends, and sports lives and religious congregations somehow connect, intersect, and overlap that teens exhibit the most committed and integral religious and spiritual lives". (p. 27). A recent review of literature from a psychological viewpoint has emphasized how religious and spiritual (R/S) practices can positively relate to sports performance among elite athletes, with humanizing



benefits such as holistic integration and coping with the inherent challenges of sports surrounding matters such as identity, losing, injuries, and competing for playing time (Noh and Shahdan 2020). These authors recognize how R/S can “provide the inner strength with which to handle emotional stress and anxiety and help athletes accept adversities positively and with a deeper meaning being placed on success and failure in their careers”. (p. 2).

## 5. Context and Method

On receipt of a USD 600,000 grant in 2015 from Lilly Endowment in relation to their “Theology Institutes for High School Youth” program,<sup>2</sup> Baylor University’s George W. Truett Theological Seminary spent two years collaborating with a host of scholars and practitioners from the US, Canada, and the UK to design and develop a high school retreat program which focused on the integration of faith and sports. The inaugural *Running the Race Well* retreat took place in June 2018 and brought together 33 high school youth from socially diverse backgrounds for eight days, with the aim of connecting theological principles, spiritual practices, and worship to sports and life. The key components of the retreat were as follows: whole group lectures and seminars (delivered in the mornings and evenings), sports laboratories (“labs”) incorporating group in-game-based activities and tasks interspersed with theological coaching input (in the afternoons), and one-to-one, small group and peer mentoring (in the evenings). Collectively, these experiences were structured to evoke behavioral responses to real-life sporting situations, in order that participants might reflect on their priorities, beliefs, feelings, and values. On the final day of the retreat, parents, local youth ministry leaders, and coaches were invited to attend a seminar on the faith–sport relationship and the theological and practical underpinnings of the retreat. For one year following the retreat, adult mentors conducted follow up one-to-one meetings with participants on a bi/monthly basis. In addition, a workshop was held for the surrounding local community on the role of parents, churches, and coaches in the lives of young people. This event was designed to raise awareness of the complexities of sports culture and to serve as a platform for ongoing meaningful dialogue among parents, coaches, and religious leaders in the locality and beyond.

### 5.1. Research Design

On-going research and evaluation was an integral part of the funding agreement, and the empirical findings presented here are drawn from a wider mixed methods research study of the inaugural 2018 RRW retreat, which sought to investigate the impact of the program on the Christian identity formation of the young people concerned. This wider investigation represented a longer-term (3-year) monitoring and evaluation process, which was designed to assess the extent to which the program had been successful in its overall aims. The research itself followed a mixed methods design, and was driven by a constructionist ontology and interpretive epistemology with the aim of eliciting the subjective interpretations of the everyday experiences of young people in relation to their participation in the various elements of the RRW program (Bryman 2016). Data were generated via a range of methods comprising pre- and post-retreat questionnaire surveys, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, observations of RRW program activities and workshops, and informal conversations with project respondents, participants, and stakeholders. The present discussion is based on data taken from the semi-structured interviews carried out with young people.

### 5.2. Sampling Procedure

A total of 15 young people were interviewed from the wider program population ( $n = 33$ ) involved in the retreat. On arrival, young people were allocated an adult mentor and placed into small (peer) groups ( $n = 11$ ), which represented the main pastoral care structure for the retreat. Two young people were selected from each small group to take part in interviews, although clashes around programming meant that not all young people were available. Sampling took into account age, gender, and sporting specialism in order

to obtain a wide variety of perspectives from the respondent cohort (Braun et al. 2016). Interview pairings were constituted in such a way that they provided a balance between diversity and similarity to ensure the generation of stimulating and supportive dialogue. All respondents were between the ages of 15 and 17 years.

### 5.3. Data Collection

Data were collected by the first and third authors, who acted together as interview hosts. The former was employed as a research consultant on the project and the second is a full-time member of staff at the host university. Ethical approval for the study was granted via the IRB protocols of Baylor University Institutional Review Board (IRB) and waivers were secured before the project was initiated, which included a specific “vulnerable populations” form. The Principle Investigators (Meyer and Parker) conducted the consent discussion with parents and participants (if under 18 years of age) and handled all related questions. Prior consent for data collection was gained in writing from both participants and their parents. When participants or their legal guardians signed the informed consent form, the investigators assumed consent had been given. At every research point (general field observation, pre- and post-survey, and interviews), respondents were reminded of their participation in the study and that they could decide at any point to withdraw from the research process. Coercion was minimized by allowing participation in the study to be dictated by either participants or their parents, and participant involvement in the research was known only to the investigators. All data and information were kept confidential, even from the organizers of the program.

Interviews lasted between 45 and 60 min and were audio-recorded and transcribed in full.<sup>3</sup> Interview discussions followed an interview schedule or guide comprising a number of open-ended questions which explored respondent lived experiences of the connections between sport and faith (Bryman 2016). The aim was to allow young people to narrate their own faith journeys and the way in which these intersected with sporting participation. Such insights were key to understanding the personal pressures and anxieties which respondents faced in connection with the prioritization of lifestyle activities and events. Crucially, these discussions created a discursive space for young people to reflect (in many cases for the first time) on the way in which sports impacted their faith, and allowed them to openly articulate the tensions and dilemmas involved.

### 5.4. Data Analysis

Analysis of the semi-structured interview data was conducted in line with the conventions of qualitative research through a process of open, axial, and selective coding and the formation of a conceptual framework that facilitated the presentation of participant experiences from their own perspectives (Bryman 2016). Data were analyzed in four stages by the first author. Firstly, transcripts were read in full to gain an overview of the entire data set. Secondly, each transcript was individually coded in line with key concepts in the extant literature (i.e., “youth and faith”) and indexed, whereby a capturing of the different aspects of participant experience took place. Thirdly, these experiences were then categorized into a number of over-arching topics broadly relating to issues concerning “faith”, “sport” and “identity”. The final stage of analysis involved the formal organization of these topics into three generic themes (for data management purposes) by further exploring the key issues around participant experience and framing these experiences within the context of existing conceptual debate (differentiated by respondents). These themes comprised (i) “sport and faith integration”, (ii) “sport and faith values and behaviors”, and (iii) “the retreat experience”. The following section presents a detailed analysis of these themes.

## 6. Sport and Faith Integration

As we have seen, amid the pressures and anxieties of teenage life, the prioritization of faith can become something of an issue, especially where the parallel demands of high-level sports participation are concerned. Irrespective of how they managed to navigate

and negotiate these competing priorities at the day to day level, all of the young people interviewed articulated some sense of connection between their sporting and their faith-based identities, although for some this was much more concrete than others, as Claire, Tom, and Daniel expressed:<sup>4</sup>

Claire: Well, I go to a Christian school, and so, all of our teachers, and everyone, it's like a very Jesus and Christ-like atmosphere, so it's already integrated for us. So, whenever I think of sports, I think of my team, and prayers before the game, so it's kind of just like, together, cause I learned sports in a Christ-like environment, so it's kind of just how I react to it.

Tom: does my faith connect with what I think about my sport. . .? Yeah, I believe it does. It has a lot to do with it. My faith, I-I always see faith as a. I define it as something you believe you can't see but you know it's there. You know? So, I try to carry that with me throughout anything and everything. Especially playing sports and playing football.

Daniel: For me, . . . it's always been like, I think of like sports like as just one of the many abilities that like God can bless you with and, um, it's one of the things I think about, where it's like, um, where God gives you abilities and, to use them, and it's like if you don't, he also like he could also take them back, and one of the things I also, just thinking about is as I continue just to pursue, p- pursue, like the um just the action of sports, is that the more I (indistinct) to proclaim his name and just to have the right mindset, and bring all the glory to him, is when he opens up more doorways, whether it be opportunities to minister to a fellow athlete, or even coaches, or just to whoever.

Here, Tom and Daniel earnestly articulate how their faith connects to sports. Their understandings of religion illustrates that what they believe is important, and that faith in God means that God is not remote, but that He cares about everyday life. In turn, their faith influences the way they think about and act in sports. [Smith and Denton \(2005, p. 138\)](#) suggest that such religious attitudes go beyond an application of religion to “. . . the strictly religious sector” of young people's lives. Indeed, as Tom demonstrates, he tries to carry his faith with him “throughout anything and everything. Especially playing sports and playing football”. It appears that each of these respondents hold to a basic belief that God is personally involved in the affairs of sports, which means that they do not compartmentalize their faith for they are keenly aware of the connections between religion and sports. [Smith and Denton \(2005\)](#) indicate that such beliefs are contrary to the revisionist faith of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD). MTD “. . . is about a belief in a particular kind of God: one who exists, created the world, and defines our general moral order, but not one who is particularly personally involved in one's affairs—especially in affairs in which one would prefer not to have God involved” ([Smith and Denton 2005, p. 164](#)). Claire appears to have learned from her particular educational context that faith and sports are integrated, with the spiritual discipline of prayer and the constructive activity of playing sports on a Christian team belonging together.

Daniel is slightly more articulate in his response in that he recognizes God's presence in sporting activities as the source of his abilities. He sees a relationship between his gifts (as abilities from God) and his responsibility to use them. Faith informs how Daniel thinks about sports to the extent that he acts from his convictions in the sphere of sports (see also [Hoven 2016](#)). Moreover, for Daniel, gifts and obligation stand in tension, so much so that he understands that he is accountable to God, and that if he fails to use God's gifts in sports, God might even “take them back”.

Daniel further sees sports as an opportunity to glorify God and, if obedient, God will provide further service or ministry opportunities. Daniel's language and conceptual understanding of God references explicitly and implicitly theological ideas such as gifts, blessings, proclamations, stewardship, obedience, roles of the mind, glory, and ministry, all of which indicate that knowing God and others in sports is not understood in terms of



therapeutic concerns or benefits to him. God is not a cosmic therapist or divine butler in Daniel's worldview (see [Smith and Denton 2005](#)). In fact, for him, there are *real* spiritual and earthly costs tied to how God meets and encounters his participation in sports. Unlike MTD, God, according to Daniel, places demands on how he lives his life in sports, and ministry opportunities are in direct proportion to Daniel living faithfully. Although other Christian traditions might challenge how Daniel construes this "rewards and punishments" narrative, Daniel's faith, nonetheless, functions to inform who he is as a Christian in sports.

For others, sporting participation clearly presented issues around the prioritization of time, emotional energy, and physical capacity. [Smith and Denton \(2005\)](#) note how sociological factors and influences such as sports can overwhelm and even compete with the faith formation of young people. As intimated above, and as seen in wider research (see [Shields et al. 2015, 2018](#)), the moral orders and practices of sports can negatively affect religious identity. Here, Sarah and Jen present the realities of how sports had come to dominate their lives over and above faith-based activities:

Sarah: It's a lot, and a lot of travelling to Dallas, and then all around Texas, so, I mean, I just never, I would always pray before games, or cross country, I ran in cross country too, um, pray before and after, but never during, I mean, I just didn't put it together. During soccer, you're so in the zone, and you're focused in, and you're ready to knock someone down, but you're not thinking of, you know, what would Jesus do.

Jen: Honestly, I never understood why sports had anything to do with being a Christian cause it's like. . . Cause like basketball, it was like I practice Sunday night, I can't go to youth group anymore because I have practice, so like it's like, "Okay no more youth group". And then it's like, okay now I ha- like. Not my new team, my old team, we had practices on like Wednesdays and Sundays. Monday, Wednesday, and Sunday. That was so unfortunate because Wednesdays and Sundays I went to youth group for bible study in youth group, you know, in church. And then, so I changed my whole schedule around and I stopped going to youth group and it was just awful . . . Cause like when I play basketball I'm not thinking about God . . . He's always there, I know that, but like, he's just not—it's gonna sound really bad—but like, it's not like my priority when I'm playing basketball.

One of the drivers of the extent to which respondents recognized a connection between sports and faith was the influence of their coaches. Here, Claire discusses the impact of her coach on her own integration of sport and faith:

Claire: Yeah, no, like, we have like game faces, like we look like we're about to (indistinct), but if we do something, it's- like cussing is like not allowed, like the other teams do, like a lot, they do, and it's just like "ahh!", and our coach is like, "if I ever hear that come out of your mouth, you're outta here", and I'm just like "ahh!", (laughs), so, you know, but, like, overall, if, like, she's just very big on, we do this for the lord, and so it's nice to be surrounded in that, and so, not only are you playing, and doing something you love, but you're surrounded by an environment of people who want you to be Christ-like and are Christ-like, themselves, so that's a big influence on me.

Juxtaposing these examples of pro-active, faith-based coaching were other less positive influences, as Ellie explained:

Ellie: That was the complete opposite from ours. My high school, now, they loved to see our frustration, like, cause people will cuss on the court, and you know, if they make a mistake, they're getting a foul, you know, everyone's yelling, you know, people are cussing and everything. Our coaches don't care, and the people that we play, they don't care either, cause it's just, we're like- yeah! Everyone trash talks with each other, it's back and forth. Yeah, that's how it is in our environment

at school. Now, like, with the bad attitude, if you're like doing good with a bad attitude, they don't care, and that's me.

Some respondents expressed a sense of confusion about the faith standpoint of their coach. Daniel and Eric, for example, spoke of the indifference and ambiguity that they had witnessed from two of their own coaches around the sport–faith relationship:

Daniel: It's, it's one of those things, where it's like, I know that they do know the lord, but they're not actively pursuing him.

Interviewer: So, does that cause some tension for you?

Daniel: Sometimes it does. Um, just in a thing of like sometimes they're, because most, majority of the time, they're in that worldly mindset, of just like, they're just there to coach, not really like lifting it to the Lord, and then coming in as the captain, um, it's like hard, because sometimes as I try to coach up other, my other players, with uh, more like um God mindset, it sometimes conflicts with the coaches just when they think that either I'm just trying to take over, or I'm messing up everything the work that they've done, and. . .

Eric: My basketball coach, is he's a Christian, but sometimes he can get carried away with the game, and it kind of gets focused on winning, but then, like at the end of the game, he's like "Guys, we play for God".

Like parents, coaches play an important role in the formation of adolescents' religious commitments. Dean (2010) points to how important parents are for cultivating a consequential faith, a faith that matters and bears fruit and resists the negative impact of MTD's worldview. However, empirical research in this area is relatively limited and further work is needed to examine how coaches can support and deepen faith formation and, by the same token, how they might exacerbate weak versions of religious identity as a consequence of a failure to act as a positive influence in this area and/or their own anemic faith.

## 7. Sport and Faith Values and Behaviors

Based on the above evidence, and given that fact that the majority of young people interviewed expressed at least some understanding of the relationship of sport and faith in their own lives, how, we might ask, did these understandings manifest themselves in terms of the way in which their faith shaped and influenced their participation in sports?

Cora: I think it's easy to have a quick temperament, but . . . I'm like, 'Okay, I have to . . . do this, because I have to keep cool, because I'm the team captain for my school, and so I'm like, I have to show [lead] by example. And so, if my team's getting under [pressure] I'm just gonna say, 'Hey, let that go, it's already over, you can't change it'. And so . . . me, as a Captain, I have to get my team under control—along with myself. And so I look to God, and I'm like, 'Okay, show me how to do this' . . .

Daniel: Sometimes, like . . . when it comes to competition, I don't think that . . . your actions can reflect your spirituality, because sometimes when you're super focused on the game, it's hard, because sometimes there's so many things going through your mind, that you could easily get off track, and then forget, and then do something that's out of character.

While all interviewees articulated a desire to "play for God" and to "play in a Godly way", the central problem for many was the way in which they perceived such behaviors to be contrary to those which their sporting contexts demanded. As we have seen, previous research has highlighted how Christian athletes routinely experience such tensions and dilemmas and this appeared to be the case for respondents especially once they began to play at the elite level:

Sarah: The stakes are much higher. You're in a tournament. You have to win. You have to get a certain amount of goals, and if you don't make that, it's just, everything is just, I don't even know how to describe it. It's such a feeling that you don't want.

Cora: I feel like my identity is known as the basketball kid, you know, so like, when I don't meet, like, their expectations, I feel like I didn't do something right, and I don't want to it [my identity] to be in basketball. I don't want it to be in my personality, or anything. I want it [my identity] to be in God . . . and I've really strayed away from that, and so I'm trying to get back to it.

What is evident in these transcript extracts is the way in which a "win-at-all-costs" mentality appeared to have gradually crept into the sporting experiences of Sarah and Cora, and that, having taken hold, it had begun to negatively impact not just the expectations and demands placed upon them, but the way they actually played. In turn, there is evidence here that the "feelings" that this scenario generated were rooted, at least in part, in a sense of complicity; a feeling for both of these young women that they had stepped into a world that had begun to change them as people, i.e., their values, what they stood for, and who they wanted to be.

Given the potential of elite sporting experience to impact respondents in this way, we were keen to explore the extent to which they believed that, as Christian athletes, they should demonstrate a different set of values and behaviors in and through their sporting lives:

Eric: Yes, I think that, as a Christian athlete, you should like shine God's light wherever you go, to the mall, or when you're on the court, especially, because . . . there are a lot of people, like at high school basketball games, [so] you can you stand out when the ref's made a bad call and you don't just explode on them, or when you make a bad pass and the other team goes down and makes a layup. So, I think that . . . having good sportsmanship and respect on the court, like as Godly characteristics, is very important.

Austin: Yeah, 'specially when it comes to football . . . especially when we're down on a lot of points. Now I get upset. I get rowdy. But, it's like . . . I can't start fighting with my teammates. I can't start a fight with the other team about it. I just gotta be like, you know, encourage them and I feel like . . . that's a common trait that we should all do. But to me it's like, well, I do it because of my faith. You know, we gotta get along. So, yeah, . . . I think that I should act different, have different values, just so we can keep our goal ahead of us and not start straining backwards . . . So, I'm like, I like to try and encourage my teammates but also, play out my frustration by helping us get to where we want to go. I think that's kinda how I do it.

Such discussions revealed further contradictions around behavioral nuances. While not referring to specific values, here, Tom and Jen appear to raise questions over the integrity of some of the people in their respective sporting circles:

Tom: . . . Especially when you're like losing. It's hard to like man keep it in to yourself you know keep it in to yourself. Times when you're losing you just want to go. . . you just wanna just wanna . . . beat someone up . . . choke somebody or something like that, but you gotta keep the faith. It's very hard. It's tough. Especially in football. The trash talking and different things going. Yeah, it's just. It's real tough . . . People think they can get by, like sneak by God's eye . . . Like, I can say I'm Christian, I can pray, I can tell God I'm Christian . . . and still go out and do what I want to do. You know? Whether it's the Christian way or not. There's a lot of people who do that. They say their Christian but they don't live up to it.

Jen: I think, especially as Christians, we should lead as an [by] example. And a lot of times . . . I'll see people who, who'll like say, "Oh yeah, I go to church all the time. I'm a really good Christian". But then you see like their actions and they don't follow up with what they're saying and I think that's like, actions sometimes, speak louder than words. It depends on the situation, always. but I think if you're gonna . . . follow God and be the best Christian you can be, you know, I think acting the best and being like the role model and like following the rules. I guess you could say is probably like the go to . . .

## 8. The Retreat Experience

As we have seen, a central aim of the RRW retreat program was to assist young people in negotiating and navigating the sports–faith relationship and establishing their spiritual identity within elite sporting contexts and beyond. In one sense, the tensions and dilemmas articulated by interviewees were nothing new. Indeed, it is widely accepted in the literature surrounding sport and spirituality that amidst the secularized ethos of Western industrialized societies and the highly commercialized world of sport, the values of yesteryear have diminished markedly in more recent times (see, for example, [Hoffman 2010](#); [Krattenmaker 2010](#)). Given this wider social and cultural climate, to what extent (if at all) did the structure and content of RRW programming help and inform participants in their thought processes around the connection between sport and faith?

Cora: I think that it's been good to take time out . . . and talk about how it's [sports and faith] supposed to connect and what we're missing. And so a lot of the times, when I'm playing basketball, I get caught up in the game, and the adrenaline is pumping, and I get carried away . . . And I really enjoy that now that I know that I have to slow down and check and that God's always gonna be with me. . . . I really struggled with making the connection, like, how am I supposed to have God with me, when I play basketball? 'Cause I always [thought] . . . okay, you can worship in church and you can worship outside of church . . . but never really, like, knew how to be a 'demonstration' [witness] within basketball . . .

For Michelle and Renee, the discussion of "truth scriptures" with their mentors (both in groups and via individual conversations) had proved helpful in allowing them to recognize God's presence in their sporting endeavors:

Michelle: Yeah . . . just thinking like, God is with me. And we had a truth scripture, and mine was, 'God would never leave us or forsake us'. So when I felt like it was just me on the court working, I was like, my team's with me, and God's with me too, like he's with me, and [even] when I make a mistake. Like, 'cause, sometimes when I make a mistake, I can isolate myself from everyone else . . . So like, I kept saying that in my head today: 'He won't leave me or forsake me', and it was working. I was staying positive, and I mean it helped . . . because I can linger on the past, sometimes . . . I would say before . . . my faith and sports didn't connect . . .

Renee: There's, like, quotes that they gave us and how God will never leave or forsake us . . . that, he'll like always be there for us, like, no matter how much we mess up, or even if we do bad in the game. Like we make one mistake, and He'll still always love us . . . God's always smiling down on us because we're doing what He created us to do. Like, he gave us a talent to play our sport that he wanted us to, and no matter if we win, we lose, we do good or bad, He's smiling, at us, like, for us, because we're doing what he wants us to do.

For others, focused time in seminars and small group discussion had helped with the practical application of Biblical truths and principles:

Cora: I think it's good, because I find myself thinking about, throughout the sermon, throughout the small groups, just breaking it down, like really breaking the sermons down really helps me. . . it's like the cow, it digests it four times.

Sarah: I am such a thinker and I am a planner too, so me trying to not plan out my day, and just spend time reflecting would be awesome, so actually today, I even went into the prayer room during worship and I just sat there, and still reflected, and journaled, and wrote down stuff and that was really nice, so. . .

Austin: I am a teenager so, of course, I'm not as close as I want to be [to God] and that's on my part . . . I realized [I need] to pay attention more to . . . what I'm saying, what I'm doing. Just so I can recognize that's not something I should doing, that's not something I should be saying. And, of course you know, whenever I'm playing sports sometimes I may get a little bit out of control. Sometimes I may get a little upset to [the point] where I'm not who I usually am. But it's helped me. After each game we play they bring us together, they have us talk about it. I'm just like if I'm upset I'm just like, 'Okay, we lost, but it's still gonna hurt. I still have the next game to go.' And whenever they put us in the small groups and we talk all together and we share our own thoughts . . . we have that connection. And so whenever we get on the field or get on the court and play we're all connected more. And I feel like that's something that I can take home to my own team.

What also became apparent during interview discussion was the way in which some respondents had been both surprised and challenged by the materials presented at the retreat, i.e., the way that they had been asked to reflect and think more intentionally about their relationship with God, and the impact that the experience had had upon them in terms of their overall view of the sports–faith dyad:

Robert: Coming in [to the retreat], I was like, 'I don't know how this is gonna turn out. I hope it helps me'. I had my doubts at first, but we started talking about how we usually leave faith off the field when we go on. And I do, do that sometimes. It was an eye opener and I was like I really do need to start thinking about it more often when I go onto the field; how God's with me, God's by my side. He's watching over me . . . that God is always there and I should always be thinking about it. And thanking him and appreciating others and appreciating my teammates for cheering me on when I should be cheering other people on.

Eric: I really like, listening to the, leaders here, like, just bringing in new ways to apply your faith, through sports . . . So, like, just thinking about how . . . you're in the locker room and you're praying, and then you go out on the court [and] you forget, you just kind of leave God in the locker room. He [one of the retreat speakers] said 'God is everywhere, so just bring him onto the court, and bring him everywhere you go, and even through your day, sometimes you need to just reflect and to think about God wherever you go . . . not only on the court'.

## 9. Conclusions

The aim of this paper has been to investigate the formation of youth identity in relation to Christianity and sport and to explore how one faith-based retreat program used theological teaching, sports coaching and one-to-one, small group, and peer-mentoring to provide a catalyst for identity formation and personal development. In particular, the paper has sought to uncover how such an approach might help young people to better navigate and negotiate the tensions and anxieties surrounding the prioritization of lifestyle activities.

Findings demonstrate that while on entering the retreat all of the young people interviewed recognized and acknowledged the relationship between sport and faith, in reality these connections were often relatively cursory, vague, and theologically uninformed. Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that even their external Christian coaches and school



environments were not always pro-active in promoting faith-based approaches to sporting participation in terms of the values and behaviors that they demonstrated and espoused.

These findings also point to practical ways in which the tensions and dilemmas of the sport–faith relationship manifested themselves in the lives of young people. Respondents spoke openly of their struggles to prioritize the faith aspects of their lives amid the wider demands of sports and of the negative impact of a “win-at-all-costs” mentality on their Christian identities. Of particular interest here is the way in which respondents spoke of the “feelings” that this scenario generated and the growing sense of “complicity” that they had experienced in terms of how their values and behaviors had begun to move away from the Christian principals which had once underpinned them.

In terms of the materials and resources made available to young people as part of the RRW program, these were perceived by many respondents to be particularly helpful in highlighting and re-establishing the theological groundings for the sport–faith relationship and how this might be practically applied and lived out. Indeed, young people spoke positively about the way in which seminars, workshops, and mentoring discussions had helped them to reconcile some of the prioritization and identity issues they had been grappling with before they arrived. The depth of rapport and quality of trust established through these interactions appeared to challenge respondents without creating resentment or alienation. This, in turn, appeared to promote a level of self-reflection and critical thinking among participants.

Alongside these findings, the authors acknowledge the following limitations of this study. Firstly, a significant proportion of youth respondents were from low-income socio-economic backgrounds, while the majority of the project staff and mentors emanated from more affluent life circumstances. Hence, there was the potential for these disparities to hinder relational dynamics. However, the retreat was intentionally designed and undertaken in line with an informal approach and ethos, and both project staff and mentors enjoyed positive working relationships with respondents which facilitated the establishment of a level of trust and credibility and an open-ness in interview discussion. It is also acknowledged that because the two interviewers were employed by the project, this may have impacted the complexion of interviewee responses, especially in relation to questions around the effectiveness of the retreat program.

Second, a common shortcoming of projects of this nature is that they often function around a romanticization of the role and impact of sports on the personal development of young people. Indeed, some have argued that claims surrounding the potential of such initiatives have been exaggerated (see [Hartmann and Kwauk 2011](#)). In this sense, it is generally accepted that such events should not be seen as some kind of panacea in terms of social transformation, but that they can be used in community settings to generate positive change in young people (see [Parker et al. 2019](#)). In turn, during the design stage of the project, staff demonstrated an awareness that for program success to be accurately measured, there was a need to adopt a robust and strategic approach to long-term research and evaluation.

Finally, we are aware of the limitations of this research in terms of the extent to which conclusions might be drawn about the overall impact of the retreat in question. We recognize that the findings presented here are contextually specific and emanate from a single, locally based program. Though part of a longer-term evaluation process, we are also aware that these findings are based upon the interpretations of three authors who have been directly involved in the inception, design, and delivery of the program and who hold a vested interest in its success and sustainability. Needless to say, all of these issues should be taken into account by the reader.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Smith and Faris (2002) demonstrate that religion among young people is associated positively with participation in constructive activities such as sports.
- <sup>2</sup> For further research and evaluative reports on the strategies, pedagogies, successes, and challenges of previous Lilly endowed high school youth theology initiatives, see Dean and Hearlson (2016) and Lytch (2006).
- <sup>3</sup> Variations on interview timings were solely due to the availability of respondents.
- <sup>4</sup> In the interests of anonymity, pseudonyms have been used where necessary.

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