

The Elite Sport and Christianity Debate: Shifting Focus from Normative Values to the Conscious Disregard for Health

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Abstract Scholars and theologians continue to debate whether or not God’s intended purpose of elite sport violates the creational normativity for elite sport. However, while it is important to be aware of the contradictions between elite sport and Christianity, there is a need for more deep-seated discussions about emotions and health problems in elite sport and why so many Christian athletes continue to train for their sport at the expense of their health. This paper summarizes the present debate regarding elite sport and Christianity and then shifts the reader to an exploration of the normalization of emotion, and the consequence of emotional suppression on athletes health. In doing so, the author presents the disregard of health problems as a more concrete measure of how far athletes should push themselves in elite sport. The author makes recommendations for emotion education and suggests directions for future research and practice.

Keywords Christianity · Elite sport · Health · Emotions · Normalization · Athletes

Introduction

We cannot dismiss the benefits that sport has for Christian and non-Christian athletes, such as developing diligence, self discipline, interpersonal dependence, cooperation, leadership skills, commitment to team, meekness and perseverance (Van Reken 1999). As Christians, we are called to work toward achieving these virtues and to develop our physical abilities. Jesus taught us the importance of loving God with all of one’s self, which includes the physical dimension. For instance, Jesus instructed, “present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service” (Romans, 12:1, NKJV). “The enjoyable satisfaction of bodily existence and the realization of bodily potential are among the blessings of God in his creation” (Cooper 1999, p. 13).

Unfortunately, often the benefits of sport are outweighed by the consequences, as athletes pursue high performance in that sport. High performance usually encompasses,

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(1) a high level of competition, (2) a high volume and intensity of training (six–18 sessions per week), (3) a high level of skill from participants in the sport, and (4) usually participants and coaches are focused on excellence and reaching a higher level in the sport. Today, elite sport is at the opposite extreme from what God intended for our physical selves.

Critics continue to question the contradictions between the normative values of current elite sport and Christianity. For instance, the pragmatic and utilitarian values that dominate sport in the name of winning and success do not “comport readily with the fruit of the Spirit and the Kingdom values of the Sermon on the Mount” (Mathisen 2008, p. 37). Further, the “winning at all cost” philosophy so prevalent in elite sport results in athletes identifying themselves with the role of sportsperson and validating themselves by winning (Hughes and Coakley 1991; Lee Sinden 2007). As a result, elite sport is often misused toward idolatrous ends, preparing the way for a kind of worship that centers on the products of human labor. Performances become an end unto themselves, resulting in athlete objectification, signified by records, medals, ribbons, money and winners (White 2008).

Christian Athletes in Sport

Christian athletes have attested to the challenges they face when trying to live by the normative values of the elite sport culture. In two studies, conducted by Stevenson (1997) and Dunn and Stevenson (1998), athletes summarized these normative values as being the importance of winning, the importance of social status, conflicts with opponents and expectations of others. The Christian athletes in the study spoke of the stress they felt, the strained relationships with other non-athlete friends, the difficulties with their schoolwork and the injuries they suffered. Some athletes had to withdraw from their sport for a while; some were able to return, but only into less competitive environments; and some athletes spoke of their need to search for a deeper meaning in their participation in sports. Nevertheless, in general, the athletes entered sport with the perception that their sport experiences were supposed to “make them feel good, successful and fulfilled, but they ended up feeling only emptiness, unhappiness and struggle” (Stevenson 2008, p. 271). As a consequence, many of these athletes either quit their sport altogether or had to find a way to come to terms with the often conflicting normative values between their Christian walk and elite sport.

Among those athletes who continued with their sport, some said they had to ignore value contradictions or compartmentalizing their sport and their faith. For instance, when they were at church they were “Christian,” but in their sport they were athletes and “left their Christianity in the locker room” (Stevenson 1997). Other athletes said that they tried to be as “Christian” as they could be as athletes when they were playing. And some athletes explained that they played “for Christ” by giving 100 percent of their effort, strength and will. It was this latter group who turned to Evangelical Christianity as a means of dealing with the problems they encountered in their high-performance pursuits (Dunn and Stevenson 1998; Stevenson 1997, 2008).

Evangelical Christianity and Elite Sport

It is common to hear Christian athletes profess their devotion to Christ as the reason for their sport achievements. During many Olympics we hear Christian athletes periodically quote their favorite bible verses in interviews while it is commendable that athletes are committed to using sport as a platform to speak about their loyalties to Christ, critics question whether or not we can simply accept athletes’ testimonies as justification for their pursuits without

taking a more critical look. For example, Null (2008) explains that “ministries through athletes” need to be careful not to neglect the most important pastoral need of the athletes with whom they work, such as being delivered from always having to prove their worth.

“If their athletes have not yet learned to break free of a sporting mentality where one’s value is determined by performance, they will be prone to thinking that the most important means of winning God’s approval is winning others to Him” (Null 2008, p. 253).

The author suggests that ministries through athletes need to make clear that Christians in the world of sport base their identity not on their efforts to evangelize for Christ, but on what Christ has already done for them on the cross.

Evangelical Christianity has also been criticized for being a marketing tool—“the selling of Jesus”—where organizations use high-profile athletes as headliners in their campaigns (Aiken 1993). Sport figures are usually introduced with great fanfare and often give a testimonial about their own journeys as sports heroes and as Christians. Unfortunately, using sports stars as recruiters for Christ can give non-Christians the impression that believing in Jesus will give them success and prosperity.

Other critics have been concerned about an approach to competition endorsed by evangelicals, called variously Total Release Performance, or Praise Performance. In this approach, performance is an act of love toward God, and so you should always put everything you have into it—your effort, attention, strength, determination, everything—100 %. In this way, you are expressing to God your gratitude for everything He has done for you. Critics question such an approach because the implication is that “any instance of losing must mean that the athlete was in fact not giving 100 %, not trying as hard as they could, not obeying the coach as they should” (Stevenson 2008, p. 274).

Another implication is that in this way almost anything can become sanctified. If you are using your gifts to the best of your ability, “for God,” then that is all that you have to be concerned about (Stevenson 2008). Does this mean that if a person is a gifted thief and he is using his gifts to the best of his ability that is all we need to be concerned about? There must be some prior, moral, Christian evaluation of the appropriate fit of the activity itself (Stevenson 2008). Further, “we must continue to discern, through empirical study and historical experience, what God’s specific norms are for areas of human life that the Scriptures do not explicitly address—industrial relations, for example, or the mass media, or literary criticism” (Wolters 2005, p. 39), or even elite sport.

Hoffman explains that Christian athletes must be careful not to confirm the “goodness” of sport and ignore the “problems.” Further, we need to be wary of whitewashing some of sport’s moral complexities, because ironically “when sport is harnessed to the evangelistic enterprise, evangelicals become as much endorsers of the myths reinforced by popular sport as they do of the Christian gospel” (1992, p. 121). “It seems that Evangelical Christian organizations that use sport and sport figures would rather turn a blind eye to the problems and contradictions inherent in elite, competitive sport” (Stevenson 2008, p. 274).

Opening Our Eyes to the Problems

Shifting the Focus: Health Problems in Elite Sport

It has been argued that generally the modern version of elite sport “has taken something God designed as good and corrupted it at its core to such a degree that its negative effects

have reached our youth sports” (Hamilton 2008, p. 173). And as a result, we need to continue to ask ourselves, “...ought Christians to engage in competition with the ruthless abandon that characterizes many sports today?” (Cooper 1999, p. 18). I would say “yes”, we do need to continue to encourage elite sport competition because elite sport itself belongs to the domain of “structure”, part of God’s creation order. Through “sin and redemption” many elite sport programs and policies have taken a distorted “direction” (Wolters 2005). Further, the sin in elite sport does not abolish all of elite sport nor take away its inherent goodness. “Creation and sin remain distinct” (Wolters 2005). In other words, elite sport is distinct from the sin that corrupts it. However, we should not support elite sport as it is today. Without changes to elite sport policies and programs, we will more than likely be unsuccessful at leading elite sport back to a way that does not violate the “creational normativity” (Wolters 2005), of sport.

Aside from the discrepancies between the value systems in elite sport and Christianity, we need to ask questions that critically examine the present problems in relation to the outcomes to athletes’ bodies and their physical and emotional health, in hopes of helping athletes experience elite sport in the manner in which God intended. We need to take a look at what happens to the health of athletes during and after their elite sport careers and question why athletes sacrifice their bodies and minds in a manner that often goes beyond what is healthy.

When it is written “I discipline my body and bring it into subjection” (I Corinthians 9:26, NKJV), God is not saying that we are to beat our bodies until we no longer function physically, especially not for the sake of achieving excellence in sport. Unfortunately, it has been well documented that most athletes go too far by training their bodies beyond their limits and developing health problems as a result. Common health problems in elite sport include substance abuse, eating disorders, osteoporosis, amenorrhea, overtraining, chronic sport-related injuries, burnout and depression (Berry and Howe 2000; Martin 1998; Montenegro 2006; Raglin and Wilson 2001; Reinking and Alexander 2005; Storch et al. 2005; Sundgot-Borgen 2002; Voight 2002). It is also common for athletes to believe that adverse effects to their health are “necessary failures” in the achievement of sport excellence (Shogan 1999). As a result, athletes exacerbate their health problems by continuing to train, despite these problems (Lee Sinden 2007; Martin Ginis and Leary 2004; Waddington 2006; Waldron and Krane 2005). Athletes have learned to disassociate themselves from their bodies (Williams 1999). Most distressing is the state of athletes’ emotional and mental health, as they consciously choose to continue to train for their sport, irrespective of health problems.

Athletes’ Disregard of Their Health Problems

Despite the fact that our bodies were designed to give us warning signs, such as extreme pain, to tell us that something is wrong and that we need to rest, most elite athletes and coaches ignore signals from their bodies. In doing so, many elite athletes fail to recognize the damage that can be caused by overtraining, irrespective of their health problems (Waddington 2006). For instance, in a study by Young and White (1995), one athlete explained, “I simply pushed harder because my injury was causing me to fall behind in my progress” (p. 51). Similarly, in a study that I conducted, an athlete admitted,

“...[my intercostal tear] would be to the point where I couldn’t breathe. I was scared...I was taking these muscle relaxers every once in a while when there would

be a flare up so that I could keep rowing. It was so sore and I just kept rowing....I would have done anything to keep rowing” (Lee Sinden 2007, p. 85).

“Pressure placed on the player to return to action before full recovery is in one sense intended to enhance the team’s ability to win, but in the process, the long-term health of the athlete is often given little consideration” (Young et al. 1994, p. 190).

Research shows that many athletes are in denial about the severity of their health problems when they are in the training state. For example, in interviews with elite female rowers, one rower stated, “I was anorexic but I wasn’t anorexic to the point where I had to be hospitalized” (Lee Sinden 2007, p. 89). However, it is interesting that after retirement athletes question why they did not listen to their bodies better when they were pursuing elite sport. As retired athletes begin to suffer consequences to their health from years of ignoring their bodies for the sake of achievement in their sport, some of them have confessed regretting not taking time away from their sport to heal their bodies properly (Lee Sinden 2010, 2007). For instance, one retired athlete explains, “no one in their right mind at 16 years old should be wrapping themselves in Saran Wrap or garbage bags sitting in the sauna” (p. 118). Another athlete confesses, “...the damage that has been done is severe. I mean I often have surgeries...I killed my body...I have ruined my spine, my back and my hips from rowing” (p. 88). And a third athlete explains,

“I have done major damage to myself... I just had my colon removed because of ulcerated colitis [which is an ulcer on the colon that causes health complications]...It started as digestive problems in my earlier days in rowing...and throwing up before races because of anxiety...” (p. 88).

With athletes regretting having disregarded their health problems now that they are no longer in the training state, we need to ask why athletes choose to ignore their health problems when they are in the training state.

My Experience as a Rower

As a retired elite amateur rower, I still admit that I love rowing. When I think of why I love rowing, I recall the aspects of rowing that I believe are part of God’s created order, such as the peaceful early mornings on the water before the sun was awake, feeling the oars as extensions of my arms going into the water, and feeling the flow of the boat running through the water. And I also love parts of rowing competitions, including the excitement of testing myself after months of hard practice, the joy of allowing myself to let go and row as hard as I can, and the satisfaction after a race of realizing that I could not have pulled one stroke harder.

Unfortunately, I understand first hand how elite sport becomes a distorted image. For example, I remember what it was like to have to live up the expectations of others, to have to learn to manage the development of serious health problems, and to take on the inherent pressure to persevere through health problems. During 16 years as a high-performance amateur rower, I suffered periodic episodes of bulimia, anorexia, chronic back injuries, burnout and depression. And, much like many other rowers who I competed with and against, I accepted my health problems as a “necessary failure” (Shogan 1999) in the pursuit of high performance. I believed that health problems were common because many of my teammates and competitors also experienced health problems and ignored them as a part of “doing whatever it takes” to be successful in rowing. I accepted my eating disorder as common in weight-restricted sports, such as lightweight rowing. And when I was injured

from overtraining I drew inspiration from scripture passages, such as “...before you were born I set you apart and appoint you as my spokesperson to the world (Jeremiah 1:5; NIV), or “perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything (James 1: 4; NIV). I believed that if God gave me the gifts He gave me then I was called to use them to the best of my ability in order that I could be a testimony for Him. Never did I acknowledge the irrationality of continuing to train for rowing irrespective of my health problems.

The Role of the Coach and Sport Environment

As a rower, I frequently heard other rowers complain about issues such as the volume and intensity of training that was required of them, reoccurring injuries that were bothering them and/or how a coach or coaches treated them. I also recalled how rowers concealed their emotions and concerns from their coaches and competitors, often because of fears of being labeled mentally weak. I, too, had similar concerns and concealed my emotions and feelings from my coaches and competitors, feelings such as anxieties about competing and worries about the volume of training. However, I could not share my thoughts or feelings with others out of fear of appearing insecure or overemotional. One coach told me, “there is no room for emotions in sport.” Or, “stop thinking and just pull”. These particular comments pressured me to hide my emotions and refrain from reflecting on whether or not I should continue rowing.

Fear was a constant emotional state for me and many of the rowers around me, which should have been a sign that something was wrong; “there is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love” (1 John 4:18, NKJV). This perceived pressure and fear to conceal my emotions was embedded in most of my relationships with my coaches and other athletes and eventually resulted in the development of unhealthy, self-destructive emotional outlets such as bulimia and alcohol abuse.

While research continues to explore athlete/coach relationships (Baker et al. 2003; Poczwadowski et al. 2006; Short and Short 2005), more research is needed to examine the consequences of coaching practices and/or athletic environments that encourage the manipulation of athletes’ emotions (Fry 2003). For example, Fry (2003) questions the morality of coaches and athletes who manipulate their own and/or others’ emotions in the quest for enhanced performance and victory. “This approach, when it becomes the overriding concern, may lead to recklessness with respect to emotion...[and] may lead to manipulative practices that are morally dubious” (Fry 2003, p. 26). The issue of morality may arise when the intent is to elicit emotions of self-assessment, such as shame, guilt, humiliation or pride, in hopes of prompting a desired response from athletes.

“Such compliance is especially problematic in cases where the coach’s desires are morally dubious, and may even be self-destructive for the athlete to carry out, but are nonetheless heeded by the athlete as the process for achieving athletic ends. This destabilizing and potentially compromising process may lead to a loss of a center in the athletes, which is tantamount to loss of the self” (Fry 2003, p.33).

Consequences of Emotional Control

In order to understand the consequences of emotional control, we need to appreciate what emotions are. Emotions are multi-faceted and researchers continue to explore alternative

meanings and understandings (Davidson et al. 2005; Fry 2003; Grandey 2000). Nevertheless, for the sake of this paper, I use the working definition of emotion, expanded from Frijda's (1986) original definition, which is used by contemporary emotion researchers (Bernstein et al. 2006; Buck 1990; Oatley and Jenkins 1996; Vallerand and Blanchard 2000; Wade et al. 2007).

An emotion is,

“a state of arousal involving facial and bodily changes, brain activation, cognitive appraisals, subjective feelings, and tendencies toward action, all shaped by cultural rules” (Wade et al. 2007, p. 388).

The definition of emotion focuses on three major components: psychological changes in the face, brain and body; cognitive processes such as interpretations of events; and cultural influences that shape the experience and expression of emotion.

Cognitive processes or appraisal is one of a multitude of ways that a person experiencing an emotion evaluates the emotion. Most researchers agree that a common first step to the experience of emotion is “appraisal”—the recognition of an event as significant to a goal (Oatley and Jenkins 1996). Therefore, only if an event is relevant to a concern will an emotion occur—an emotion usually “moves” a person in some way. Emotion is a subjective experience (Averill 1980, 1994; Deci 1980), therefore, all emotions refer back to the person who feels, defines and experiences them (Denzin 1989).

Generally, negative, or unpleasant emotions occur when the event is perceived by a person to have moved them away from a goal. When an athlete is injured, he or she may evaluate this event as an impediment to achieving their goal. This evaluation may be followed by negative emotions, such as distress, worry and/or fear. Guilt or humiliation may develop if the athlete believes he or she has failed at achieving their goal. Fear may result in the athlete if they feel that their goal is being threatened, and anger may result in the athlete if others try to interfere with these goals. In sport, negative emotions are commonly characterized as harmful or dysfunctional. Harmful or negative emotions may include “worried, insecure, nervous, angry, panicky, doubtful, tense, and/or afraid” (Hanin 2000, p. 305).

The degree to which an emotion is experienced as negative, unpleasant, positive and/or pleasant depends on how important the event is to the person experiencing the emotion. Most elite and aspiring elite athletes will experience more negative emotions than positive emotions because most events will impede their goals to achieve high performance. Few athletes can achieve their dreams of competing at the Olympics. Negative emotions are most likely to be the more common experience among high-performance amateur athletes with health problems because health problems impede most high-performance athletes' Olympic goals.

This paper is primarily concerned about the control of negative emotions. Although God calls us to be self controlled; “to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self control...” (2 Peter 1: 5, 6; NKJV), self control should be a natural part of fruitful growth, not as a means of forced suppression or deception of self and others. Although control of emotions can sometimes be good temporarily to achieve a certain purpose, control becomes unhealthy when it leads to suppression of stressful emotions. Specifically, when stressful emotions are suppressed, the consequences may be the development of unhealthy or self-destructive emotional management outlets or techniques, and/or the development of health problems. Health problems have been reciprocally correlated to the suppression of stressful emotions such as anger, fear, and/or anxiety (Broderick et al. 2005; Diamond et al. 2003; Oatley and Jenkins 1996; Rojo et al. 2006; Sobel 1996; Taylor et al. 1991; Traue and Pennebaker 1993; Wenzlaff and Bates 1998). For instance, the development of eating disorders has

been associated with athletes' inability to manage their stressful emotions in a healthy manner, thus turning to alternative, more self-destructive emotional outlets (Anorexia Nervosa and Related Eating Disorders Inc. 2002; Rojo et al. 2006). In addition, Cornelius (2002) found that an athlete's inability to manage stressful emotions, such as guilt, anger, shame, and/or fear, is a factor that predisposes athletes to injury. Further, athletes need better coping strategies when they retire from sport, as many leave sport depressed and unable to deal with the loss of their athletic identities.

Emotional Control and Athletes' Decision to Disregard Their Health

With vast research warning athletes about the health consequences of emotional suppression and disregarding their health problems, why are so many athletes choosing to ignore what their thoughts, feelings and bodies are telling them when they are training for elite sport? According to Lee Sinden (2010, 2007), athletes choose to suppress their emotions and continue training despite the development of health problems because they are persuaded, or "normalized," to do so in their sport environments. In a study conducted of retired female rowers who had suffered health problems when they were elite rowers, all 11 athletes who were interviewed admitted to having ignored warning signs regarding their health and training, even after the problems escalated. Although the study did not indicate whether the athletes were Christians or non-Christians (Lee Sinden 2007), the results provide insight into how we can bring elite sport one step closer to what God intended.

The following explains this study in more detail.

Normalization of Emotion

Lee Sinden (2010, 2007) investigated Foucault's (1977) concept of normalization in relation to negative emotions in elite amateur rowing. Normalization refers to the establishing of "normal" as a standard for judgment that sets standards and ideals for human thought and human conduct against which individuals are assessed, measured and judged (Foucault 1977, as cited in Lee Sinden 2010). Normalization is internalized in us through the mechanisms of disciplinary power that can function both positively and negatively. While this study primarily examined the negative aspects of normalization, to examine the problems in some elite amateur rowing environments, by no means did the study take for granted the positive experiences that athletes have through sport. Positive aspects of normalization occur when athletes learn skills and develop mastery over the performance of their bodies. It can also be said that normalization functions positively when athletes develop Godly character, such as diligence, self discipline, interpersonal dependence, cooperation, leadership skills, commitment to team, meekness and perseverance, as was aforementioned. On the other hand, normalization functions negatively when athletes have lost control of their own bodies. Athletes developing health problems, for instance, are an example of athletes losing control over their bodies.

Lee Sinden (2010, 2007) explored how normalization functioned negatively through athletes' emotions. The "normalization of emotion" (Lee Sinden 2010), functioned through normalizing methods, namely "hierarchical observation," "normalizing judgment" and "the examination" (Foucault 1977, as cited in Lee Sinden 2010), used to persuade athletes to conform to established norms. Further, together with the normalization of emotion, this study examined whether, in addition to technologies of gender, sexuality, race and ability (Shogan 1999, as cited in Lee Sinden 2010), there was a technology of emotion—mechanisms that convince athletes that emotions are mentally weak, irrational,

feminine and negative—acting on and through female rowers’ athletic experiences in high-performance rowing. Ultimately, the study examined whether normalizing methods and the technology of emotion contributed to female high-performance rowers’ decisions to continue training after they developed health problems.

Hierarchical Observation

The study showed how technologies of emotions worked through an observing hierarchy to encourage athletes to watch each others’ outward emotional expressions in order to learn what was and what was not appropriate in their rowing environments. For instance, one athlete explained, “I don’t see [champions]...get upset...You don’t trust someone who is breaking down or showing emotion...Emotionally tough people never really complain” (Lee Sinden 2010, p. 249).

The environments in rowing were conducive to those in which an observing hierarchy could take place. In particular, environments tended to be places where the athletes were isolated. This isolation created an atmosphere where surveillance made it possible to gain knowledge about the athletes in an attempt to alter them. Surveillance worked as the athletes watched other rowers refrain from showing fears, anxieties, and/or worries. For example, one rower stated, “...emotional is bad in the rowing circle because emotional means you are crazy” (Lee Sinden 2010, p. 249).

In the course of surveillance and comparison, the technologies of emotions coerced the rowers to accept which emotions and behaviors were acceptable in elite amateur rowers. Rowers in this study learned that being positive and mentally strong were the two main characteristics that successful rowers possessed.

Lee Sinden (2010) showed how technologies of emotion work subtly, as the rowers were unaware that their emotions were being normalized. One athlete explained, “I really had no idea what was going on, I just sat in the boat and pulled hard with everyone else”...[E]veryone or other people were [ignoring their health issues] too...I thought it was normal in the sport” (p. 248).

Slowly, as the rowers watched each other hide their fears, anxieties, worries and/or doubts, the technologies of emotion increased the rowers’ desires to conform their emotionality to what they believed were desirable characteristics in elite rowers. For instance, the rowers controlled their fears and anxieties in order to avoid the appearance of mental weakness, particularly to their competitors, which lead to the suppression of their concerns about training (Lee Sinden 2010).

Normalizing Judgment

According to Foucault (1977, as cited in Lee Sinden 2010), the purpose of the normalizing judgment in the penal system and/or the military is to punish the individuals who are not conforming to the established norms. Similarly, Lee Sinden (2010, 2007) showed that normalizing judgment worked to punish rowers if they were not conforming to the established norms in relation to their emotions. The data showed how normalizing judgment worked through small judgment and punishing mechanisms to close gaps between those who were successfully normalizing their emotions to the standards of emotionality in their rowing environments and those who were not. For instance, the rowers described instances when they felt humiliated because their coaches yelled at them in front of their teammates, after they had questioned why the training was progressing in the manner in which it was. The common response was that the rowers did not want to express themselves again after

these incidences. Punishment was also evident when coaches ignored the athletes, took away the use of the best equipment and/or removed the rowers from their seats or places in the boats. Two athletes describe normalizing judgment in the following responses,

“...If you didn’t conform to what [the coach] wanted he just rejected you”...He just wanted winning athletes...he would take away privileges...I felt like I had no control over the situation...it was like a cult (Lee Sinden 2007, p. 110 and 2010, p. 249).

“I learned...that even if I was upset about something for the most part I kept it to myself...I hide my emotions to look mentally tough...If you are tired and not capable of doing any more you didn’t say anything because...you wouldn’t want anyone...to think that you were incapable” (Lee Sinden 2007, p. 113)

Normalizing judgment was initially successful because the rowers continually attempted to conceal their emotions in order to escape being judged and punished. For example, all the rowers described instances when they wanted to address certain concerns with their coaches, yet refrained from doing so because they did not want to be labeled weak or “high maintenance.” Concerns about unrealistic training expectations were common grievances that the rowers wanted to speak to their coaches about but instead suppressed their concerns. Eventually, normalizing judgment worked through their emotions, as the rowers felt guilt, shame, fear and anxiety if they were having difficulty concealing their emotions. As a result, the rowers continued training at volumes that eventually had a reverse effect on their rowing performances and their health. The athletes continued training beyond what their bodies were capable of because they did not want to be portrayed and as weak and incapable (Lee Sinden 2010).

According to Foucault (1990), power circulates throughout localized systems, rather than imposing itself from the top down. Similarly, normalizing judgment functioned through relationships, as the rowers in this study learned from other rowers and their coaches what was accepted as the standards of emotionality and training. The data showed how all the rowers were taught through surveillance to train at high volumes without outwardly complaining, and when they suffered health problems they learned to train through the health problems without complaint (Lee Sinden 2010). The athletes admit that they did not want their teammates to know when they were injured. The rowers did not want to show their emotions in order to avoid being judged by their teammates as being untrustworthy and then punished for being thought of as an athlete who was mentally weak. As a consequence, the rowers developed a perception that emotions were controllable and that health problems were something they need not consider seriously.

The Examination

According to Foucault (1977, as cited in Lee Sinden 2010), the examination combines the techniques of an observing hierarchy and those of a normalizing judgment. The study expanded Foucault’s examination, by showing how the rowers’ abilities to hide their emotions were the subject of assessment, which took place during ergometer tests, time trials and rowing competitions. Through tests, trials, and competitions the coaches, competitors, and teammates examined which athletes were able to cope with the pressures of competition and which rowers were not. In the rowing environments described in this study, coping was displayed by controlling fears, anxieties, doubts, and worries. In addition, during competitions, the athletes admit not wanting to show their emotions in order to “gain a mental edge” over the other competitors. For instance, an athlete explains,

“If I had raced against someone who was emotional in the single I would have used that against them...I have used other people’s emotions and felt that it was a weakness on their part...” (Lee Sinden 2010, p. 251)

In turn, being able to cope with the pressures of competition and controlling their negative emotions gave the rowers a perceived sense of competence as rowers. The examination was used to present a visual gap between the athlete who could control their emotions and those who could not, in an attempt to try to homogenize the athletes’ emotional responses (Lee Sinden 2010). Further, once athletes experienced success in their sport, they felt even more pressure to hide their emotions and to persevere through their health problems.

However, although the athletes were initially successful in their attempts at controlling their emotions, this control was only temporary. Without healthy reflection in relation to their emotions, their emotions became suppressed and the athletes failed to develop proper emotional outlets for their stress. Over time, the rowers’ bodies broke down to the point where they were no longer able to conform to the training that was required.

Summary of Findings

At the beginning of the interviews, the athletes were asked why they thought they stayed in rowing irrespective of their health problems. The rowers believed they continued rowing because they did not want to lose their positions on their team. In addition, the rowers were afraid of losing the training effect and/or allowing their competitors to “gain an edge” over them. However, with further probing during the interviews, the data showed that normalization of emotion was an influential factor in the rowers’ decisions to continue training after they developed health problems. Normalization of emotion persuaded the rowers to suppress their fears, doubts, worries and/or anxieties regarding their injuries, and eating disorders in particular. Specific technologies of emotion coerced the rowers to develop the opinion that outward emotional expressions of fear, anxiety, doubt and/or worry were signs of mental weakness, irrationality and/or negativity. The rowers suppressed these emotions because they did not want to portray the image that they were incapable as rowers (Lee Sinden 2010). As a result, the rowers failed to talk to their teammates and coaches when they were worried about the training levels, anxious about their inability to perform, discouraged about the ways in which the coach was coaching, when they had concerns about their injuries and/or when they had other issues. In turn, the rowers continued to train despite their injuries, ignored the potential seriousness of these problems and failed to seek medical help. Over time, the rowers’ bodies could no longer perform at previous performance levels. Eventually, all the rowers retired from rowing due to complications stemming from initial injuries and/or disordered eating patterns that went untreated, or complications related to one or more other health problems including chronic injuries, burnout and/or depression (Lee Sinden 2010).

Four athletes in this study described what they called good or positive experiences with a coach or in a rowing environment. Each acknowledged that they were free to express themselves in the environments they thought were good or positive, and they believed that they were achieving their best performances. These descriptions could be contrasted to the descriptions of their experiences that negatively normalized their emotions. The rowers described how they felt more confident, more joy, and did not feel inhibited in relation to their ability to express themselves. When they related both negative and positive rowing experiences, it was evident that rowers who felt their emotions were less constrained, were

more positive about training and competing. Moreover, two athletes stated that they were physically and emotionally healthier when they were rowing in these positive environments. From these limited data, it may be concluded that coaches who work to open lines of communication and who encourage their rowers to express their feelings are not normalizing the athletes' emotions in a negative and destructive manner, but are contributing to the maintenance of good health and improved sport performance among their rowers.

Where Do We Go from Here?

Although it can be said that the normalization of emotion and the subsequent emotional suppression was an influential factor in some female rowers' decisions to continue training despite their health problems, a generalization cannot be made that the normalization of emotion works in all athletic environments (Lee Sinden 2010). There are differences between rowing environments and other sport environments, and the fact that each athlete is unique indicates that further research is needed to examine the impact of normalization of emotion on a broader scale.

Nevertheless, generalized questions can be asked about the emotional health of athletes in elite sport, the role that coaches play in the development of athletes' health problems, and how we can encourage athletes to listen to their emotions and view their health problems as possible signs that they have pushed their bodies too far. For instance, with respect to coaches having a negative impact on the lives of elite athletes, I question what we can do to help coaches stay away from practices that make use of destructive normalizing techniques? Would advanced education training, such as courses in counseling, sociology in sport, and/or health, provide the coaches with adequate skills and confidence to help them implement healthier training environments? And if these programs were established to help coaches, would the majority of coaches choose to implement them? Worded differently, I wonder whether or not education would be enough to convince coaches that they need to take the emotional health of their athletes seriously and perhaps alter previous coaching paradigms?

Perhaps a place to start is at the localized systems of organized competitive sport, where young athletes and coaches are discovering what their sport participation means to them. It is at this level where we need to help young athletes slow down their training. Elite sport philosophy has trickled down into youth sport programs to the point that young athletes are also being forced to train at levels that are often beyond their bodies' capabilities. Athletes from the start of their sport participation need to take time to develop, in order to prevent some of the health problems that are so prevalent in elite sport programs today. Further, young athletes can learn that negative emotions are not always "dysfunctional"; emotions, including negative ones, are part of God's creation in us, which can be used in a healthy manner, to communicate with ourselves and others in ways that can take us to different levels of understanding and awareness. "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted" (Matthew 5:4; NKJV).

Conclusion

This paper briefly examines the ongoing debate about whether or not elite sport is a Christian endeavor. Undeniably, few would argue that sport leaders and educators need to take a hard look at alternatives to the "winning at all cost" philosophy in order to create a

sport ethic that is more pleasing to God. However, to date, arguments discussing the normative values in sport have been ineffective in making major systemic and sustainable changes to high-performance sport.

This paper proposes, as an alternative, a shift in focus from debates about the normative values in elite sport and Christianity to addressing health problems in sport as a sign that achieving high performance in modern sport goes beyond what God asks of us as Christians. More deeply, this paper attempts to understand athletes' decisions to consciously persevere in their sport training despite their health problems, in order to offer practical suggestions for improving the health of elite athletes and progressing one step closer to redeeming elite sport practices. God wants us to enjoy good health and provided us with the knowledge and power to keep us well (Byl 2008). Without a focus on improving our bodies "we risk viewing the body as merely a temporal dwelling place (Williams 1999). Through healthier elite sport environments athletes can honor their bodies as the "temple of the holy spirit" (1 Corinthians 6:19, NKJV).

Further research is needed into the development of policies that systematically identify and support the needs of all high-performance athletes, and at all fundamental levels. In addition, programs need to be developed that teach coaches about the roles they play in the lives of their athletes, and how they can create environments that are healthy for their athletes' overall development and wellbeing. Until these such programs are implemented, health problems will more than likely continue to be viewed as a price that athletes have to pay in their pursuit of high performance in sport. At present, we need to continue questioning whether or not we should be encouraging and supporting athletes' high-performance sport goals; unarguably on the basis that elite sport is currently an emotionally and physically unhealthy place for athletes to be.

Ideally, with the improvement of elite sport practices and policies, elite athletes will learn to identify, accept, and manage their emotions in a manner that leads to better health. Moreover, with the improvement of high-performance sport practices, athletes will experience more positive emotions, including joy, as they experience competitive sport in the manner in which God created it.

"Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice!" (Philippians 4:4).

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