

**SPORT AND THE CHURCH: EXPLORING SPORT IN THE CHRISTIAN LIFE CENTER**

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**ABSTRACT**

Sport and religion are aligned with each other in a variety of fashions, including the association between churches and sport activity. The use of sport commonly occurs by Protestant Christian churches, including Southern Baptist churches, which is a denomination that readily promotes the value of offering sport and recreation activities. This work identifies sport activities and related aspects of church provided sport.

**INTRODUCTION**

Sport is a major facet in the lives of many people in contemporary America. The emergence of sport can be seen in practically all aspects of life and society. The presence of sport is even seen in relation to churches. This connection of church and sport proposes some interesting issues.

The relationship that exists between sport and religion occurs in a variety of associations. As Hoffman (1992) stated, where the organized church is found, sport is also likely to be found. The “use” of sport by religious institutions and organizations, as well as the “use” of religion by sports organizations appear in various forms throughout contemporary sport (Coakley, 1998; Eitzen & Sage, 1992; 1997). This can be seen through all levels of sport, from local level (i.e. church sport) up through elite level sport (i.e. Olympic Games or professional sports).

To date the presence of church-provided sport has received a relatively small amount of attention by researchers. There can be numerous reasons that can be given to help explain why the research in

this area has been and still is so limited. Prebish (1992) proposed that the lack of sophistication and a lack of knowledge related to the connection of religion and sport, as well as the relative newness of the study of sport as an area of academic interest have help hinder such research.

**CHURCHES USING SPORT**

Churches providing sport is a common occurrence in America today. The phenomena of prevalence of churches providing sporting endeavors and facilities has really proliferated since the 1970’s (Ladd & Mathisen, 1999). Churches have made use of sport in the form of leagues, tournaments, facilities and so forth, for members and nonmembers alike.

**CHURCH SPORT AND CHURCH RECREATION STUDIES**

Various studies have looked at the place of sport and recreation as it is being used by churches. From these studies, results suggested that recreation was held in high regards among church leaders. Furthermore, it was shown that the majority of responding churches provided recreation programs to both members and non-members in the surrounding church community, though it was noted that the majority of the recreational activities were offered to members.

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Also, it was shown that recreation and sport activities were seen as making valuable contributions to the church (Adkins, 1987, Ermand, 1990; Ernce, 1987; Hensley, 1998; Mattingly, 1984; and Ogden, 1978). Among the contributions that such activities brought were providing an avenue for social connections (including personal connections, such as fellowship opportunities), outreach opportunities, and health aspects, and a non-threatening sport environment.

#### SOUTHERN BAPTIST SPORT AND RECREATION

The Christian Life Center (CLC) selected for this study belonged to a Southern Baptist church. A Southern Baptist CLC was selected due to the fact that the Southern Baptist church has been recognized as a denomination that commonly promotes sport and recreation activity involvement (Kraus, 1984; Ladd & Mathisen, 1999; Mattingly, 1984; Ogden, 1978; Overman, 1997). Furthermore, the Southern Baptist church also has a Church Recreation Program. The Church Recreation Program is part of LifeWay Ministries which is responsible for a variety of publications and advisory functions for Southern Baptist churches (and other Christian denominations potentially). The Church Recreation Programs serves as a service that provides a variety of resources for church recreators and church sport providers. Among the services that are provided include a variety of manuals and materials, personal instruction from professional advisors, conferences, and other items of interest. The Church Recreation Program does not serve as a governing agency, but rather as an advisory and assistance providing organization.

Church provided sport is often desired to be associated to the principles associated with Coakley's (1998) pleasure and participation model of sport. This model shows the comparison and contrast with Coakley's power and performance model. The pleasure and participation model basically represents a diverse array of different physical activities, but can generally be classified as emphasizing aspects such as: active participation centered around a combination of connections (i.e. connections between people, mind

and body, and between physical activity and the environment), empowerment (as opposed to power) through experiencing sport, inclusive participation, democratic decision making through cooperation, interpersonal connection through participation with others (rather than against), and an ethic of personal expression and growth.

#### SPORT MODELS

Coakley (1998) described two models of sport, the power and performance model of sport and the pleasure and participation model of sport. In North America today, sport is largely identifiable in the form of the power and performance model. Power and performance sports are characterized as being highly organized and competitive in nature. In general this model emphasizes sport in which:

- Strength, speed, and power to push the human limits, as well as to dominate opponents in the pursuit of victory and accolades.
- The concept that excellence occurs through competitive success, as well as intense dedication and hard work, plus the combination of such with aspects such as sacrifice and risk taking.
- Importance is expressed toward record setting, technology implementation, and through defining the body as a machine.
- There is a focus toward exclusive participation based on competitive success and physical skills.
- There is a hierarchical authority structure where athletes are subordinate to coaches and these coaches are in turn subordinate to owners/administrators.
- Defining opponents as "enemies;" antagonism between us and them (opponents) (Coakley, 1998).

#### PLEASURE AND PARTICIPATION MODEL

Many forms of contemporary sport fall in line with the pleasure and participation model of sport. Jay Coakley (personal communication, 2000, October 31), explained that the pleasure and participation model, (as well as the previously mentioned power and performance model) was partially inspired by Mariah Burton Nelson's (1991) "military model"

and “partnership model” of sport, and the work of Mary Duquin's concept of an “ethic of care.” This model basically emphasizes:

- Active participation based on the combination of various connections (such as the connections between people and the connections between physical activity and the environment).
- An ethic of enjoyment, growth, personal expression, good health and mutual concern, including concern for teammates and opponents.
- Empowerment (rather than domination) through experiencing one’s body as a source of pleasure and well-being.
- Inclusive participation based on accommodating for differences in physical skills.
- Democratic decision making systems which are categorized by cooperation, sharing power, and establishing a give-and-take relationship between athletes and coaches and other figures.
- Interpersonal support through competing with rather than against others (opponents serve as a means of testing each other, rather than an enemy) (Coakley, 1998).

“People do not play sports in a social and cultural vacuum,” (Coakley, 1998, p. 113) and the two aforementioned models do not necessarily encompass all means in which sport activity can be organized. However, pleasure and participation model offers a way to challenge and oppose the power and performance ideals. When taking part in sport, participants can be drawn to consider alternative selection opportunities.

Emphasizing pleasure and participation considerations can allow sport and socialization to have a profound influence on the experiences sports participants have by impacting the social world which are created by sport activity and establishing sport’s role within the setting and the subsequent cultural processes. By rejecting power and performance principles, sport participants can opt for sport opportunities that are focused on values and experiences, which can allow them to establish connections through enjoyable physical

activities such as can be seen in the following generalizations from the pleasure and participation model in sport:

- *Playing not winning* is the most important thing.
- People enjoy playing with each other—even when there are unequal skill levels
- Humiliation, shame, and domination are not consistent with the “spirit” of the activities (Coakley, 1998).

#### CHURCH PROVIDED SPORT: A CASE STUDY OF A CHRISTIAN LIFE CENTER (CLC)

To provide greater insight into the aspects of church provided sport, the following descriptive and informative information pertaining to a case study of a CLC setting should shed some light on this situation. In this particular site, the CLC is a facility that is adjoined to a large church that is located in the heart of the thriving downtown section of a city in the Southeastern United States. The CLC is approximately 35 years old, and is quite a nice facility that has housed quality health and fitness equipment, as well as an attractive gym and an outdoor swimming pool. The CLC served as the location for activities both pertaining to sport and physical activity as well as non-sport related activities, including arts and crafts, Bible study groups, dining and snacking, and also as a site for work for numerous full and part-time employee and interns, including the CLC director (also referred to as the Minister of Christian Life), the church youth minister, the minister to college students, two secretaries, and numerous other employees that spend work time duties in the CLC.

There were numerous sport and physical activity programs that were based at the CLC. Among the activities and programs that were provided are things such as formally structured leagues, informal mid-day and morning basketball leagues, camps, pick up games, a variety of aquatic activities (including “water babies” which is a parent-child interaction in a swimming environment, recreational swimming, and water aerobics), aerobics, and game room activities (such as air hockey, billiards, foos ball, and table tennis),

and a variety of other physical health related activities, such as body analysis and first aid training.

Facility attributes included a gymnasium that housed various activities including basketball courts and volleyball courts, two racquetball courts, an outdoor swimming pool, an aerobics studio, a Nautilus universal weight room, a free weight room, an exercise room (including Stairmasters, exercise bikes, and treadmills), and a well supplied game room. Furthermore there are locker room facilities established for users as well.

### FINDINGS AND RESULTS

The researcher examined the emerging themes in an effort to understand and identify the role of the sport activity in the CLC, as well as understanding the implementation of the pleasure and participation model characteristics in the sport activities (elements of this is detailed throughout the findings section, but is primarily highlighted in the final subsection—components of sport play). Four dominant themes emerged and will be reflected in the findings and results section. Theme sections such as social connections, religion aspects, outreach, and components of sport play and competition will be detailed.

### SOCIAL INVOLVEMENT

Social connections were commonly observed through personal interactions throughout the CLC. The occurrence of fellowship, which includes involvement and interaction with others in a joyous manner, between the activity participants was displayed in a variety of forms. The CLC served as a site for individuals to spend time and interact with their friends. These connections could be seen in the form of the prevalently found interactions of college students, church members, league members, and additional other activity participants. Such connections were noticeable through observations, interviews, and general conversations between the researcher and activity participants. It became obvious to the researcher that there were a lot of regular attendees who viewed the CLC to “hang out” (in the verbiage of one participant).

Just as was the case in a study by Adkins (1997), fellowship was a major part of the CLC culture. The CLC was viewed as a site for socialization, including recurring actions such as the presence of joking and picking with each other, and occasional flirtation.

Other occurrences of social and personal connections were displayed through actions and interactions of college-aged activity participants. As one individual put it, “we are all friends in the college department.” This individual also went on to explain how they also get to know and interact with other age groups through league interaction, including the prevalent occurrence of roommate relations at the CLC and the fact that the CLC served as a site for making future social plans (such as dinning or movies) and discussions of previous social encounters (such as going to the beach or watching movies the previous night).

The social interaction aspect was further developed in the CLC through the facility serving as site for many professionals and business people from the sounding downtown business community commonly participated church provided sport and physical activities at the CLC. According to the CLC director, the main focus for the outreach plans of the CLC is to reach these populations. The occurrence of this was evident as the common involvement of such participants were readily observed, including a variety of actions which included playing basketball with each other in formal evening league games, as well as in informal businessmen’s leagues games during the daytime-lunch break time period. It was quite common to see the “regulars” conversing with each other about the sport and recreation activities or other items of general interest when they meet up at the CLC. This was evidenced through conversation about activities such as a tennis tournament, trips to the beach, vacations, and other points of conversation.

The friendly interaction between players from the teams that were just composed of individuals from this particular church’s activities, seemed to be more commonplace than the interaction with “others” that were from other church settings.

This was noticeable through the inter-church volleyball league. In this league, two of the teams were affiliated with the host church and the other teams were from other area churches. In this league, though there was some extra-team interaction, it was different from the basketball league in which all of the players and teams were affiliated with the church and/or the CLC Wellness Program (which is a CLC membership that is similar in form to a health club membership in the form of paying dues for privileges of using the CLC and activities therein).

### THE RELIGION CONNECTION

In addition to the interpersonal connections occurring at the CLC, the presence of connections between sport activity involvement and aspects of religion also were prevalent. Traces of this could be seen in a variety of forms. First of all, the site itself is located on the same “campus” as the religious settings of the sanctuary, offices, and other sections of the entire church structure. The CLC is headed by a director that holds the position of Minister of Christian Life and is a seminary trained religious leader. He says that he took this position in response to “God’s call to do this ministry.” In addition to this, there were Bible study groups and youth group religious meetings that took place within the setting of the CLC. Additionally there were various other items such as printed materials and signs that displayed Bible verses and religious principles prominently displayed in the CLC.

Additionally, the presence of prayer was commonly implemented in sport activities. Prayer was held during evening league events (always before games and sometimes after) and camps alike. The prayers that were initiated at the league events were administered before the start of the matches. Players from both teams, as well as supervisors and/or officials would take part in the prayer time activity. Issues such as safety, having fun, proper conduct, and Christian behavior (including attributes such as glorifying God, being good examples, and exemplifying one’s faith) would be addressed in these prayer sessions.

As previously mentioned, prayer also occurred in the camp settings as well. In addition to prayer time, the basketball camps also implemented a time of devotion. The basketball camps were a part of a program called Upward Basketball, which is a church involved basketball camp program that is part of Upward Unlimited, based out of Spartanburg, South Carolina. Upward Unlimited provided materials for the camp activities and other camps that have been provided in various settings such as this around the country. The mission statement of Upward Basketball aims to “lift Upward the name of Jesus and reach Unlimited lost people for Jesus Christ.” During the camp instruction, coaches were responsible for giving a time of devotion or Bible study. Additionally, stars were given to the campers as a form of “reward.” One of the stars that were issued was the white star which stood for Christ-like attitude.

Another religious involvement that occurred in the collected data was the fact that people were observed sitting or standing around in the main entrance and the dining/snacking area of the CLC discussing different religious issues. Religion conversations included discussion of the Bible and theological issues pertaining to thoughts on salvation and denominational differences.

It should be noted, however, that not all sport participants take part in religious activities provided by the CLC. Some participants were involved such activities at other churches or did not take part in other church provided activities.

### OUTREACH

The presence of outreach has ties to personal connections and religious connection as well. According to John Garner (1999), director of the Church Recreation Program of the Southern Baptist Convention, churches should use sport as a tool for outreach. The uniqueness of the CLC, as well as the wide variety of activities that that it provides, served as a platform for various forms of outreach, which was exemplified by offering league participants and their families the opportunity to utilize aspects of the facility on league nights. This included groups from other



churches such in the volleyball league, and the point was stressed about how families could use the facility, including the pool (which seemed to be especially emphasized). As one participant stated, the CLC “brings a lot of people in.” This individual also went on to state that a lot of these people stay on and continue to come to the CLC and the church. Another individual went on to explain about how the CLC could be a “good witness,” but “we often fall short.” This point was expanded on by detailing that sometimes people fall short due to putting personal interests first. The same individual went on to say that people “could do more” in regards to bringing people in to the CLC and the church, and subsequently making these individuals feel welcomed once they do enter the CLC. He said that some people do a better job than others do, “it depends on the people.”

To note the desire for outreach even further, the director explained that there are a number of modifications planned that are to be aesthetically pleasing to guests and participants. Scheduled modifications included adding a new floor in the aerobics studio. He said that when they get the new floor, it will be more appealing and easier on people’s legs and will serve to “draw people in.”

Ermand (1990) found that church programs can provide opportunities to a wide selection of people, both from the church site as well as to people that are not church members or church regulars. Ogden (1978) found that though respondents (church pastors and lay leaders) felt that evangelism should be church recreation’s most important purpose, the results suggested that the actual practice was to meet church member’s needs. The CLC served both church members and non-members well, and placed a strong emphasis toward involving a wide range of people in CLC activities. The CLC director actually stated that the main focus of the CLC ministry was actually focused on business people and workers that are largely grouped in the proximate area of the church. One of the promotional brochures from the CLC actually mentioned how the Priority Wellness program is specifically designed “to meet the needs of the business professionals in the downtown [name of city] community.” The same

brochure went on to explain that features of the Priority program assisted individuals in the business and professional communities to pursue “more productive, well-balanced” lives. The director stated that the focus of the CLC had moved from a focus toward senior citizens at its inception, to focus on youth, to the current status of the focusing toward the business workforce.

#### COMPONENTS OF SPORT PLAY

The level of athletic competition was quite compatible with the pleasure and participation model. This was exemplified in the presence of a diverse field of activity participants, through a camaraderie-natured (rather than a combative-natured) sport environment, aspects of togetherness, and connections with the environment and others. Such issues has been exemplified throughout the findings, and in particular, will be profiled throughout the “components of sport play” subsection.

Participants involved in CLC activities included individuals of diverse characteristics, including a great diversity in the range of ages for those involved (ages ranged from babies, such as with the “water babies” program, which includes babies and small children, through senior citizens). Additionally, diversity in skill levels in both league and non-league play was reflected, where individual participants displayed a wide range of abilities.

As for the competition level at the CLC, the organized evening leagues displayed great parity among the participating teams. The league events commonly displayed contests that were very competitive in nature and for the most part, the competing teams in the evening basketball league had similar records, except for one team, which was the only team that was undefeated. As it turned out, the undefeated team was the one in which the director was a member. This brought up a bit of speculation on the part of members of other teams, but no major points of contention were addressed. Though they were undefeated, they have had a few closely contest events, which they were just fortunate enough to come out winning in the end.

As for the equity in playing ability, this has been noted by numerous individuals in conversation with the researcher. It was said that it often is a matter of “who shows up” or “who doesn’t show up” on any given night. This is basically stating that the key presence of a key player can sometimes make the difference in the outcome of the games.

As for the volleyball league, the level of play there was quite even as well. In this league, teams were composed of willing participants from a variety of different area churches. There were a couple of teams that played below the level of the other teams, but it was a tight race usually to see who emerged victorious during the weekly play. Regardless, participants, whether having won or lost, generally expressed that they enjoyed their experience (i.e. through conversations, smiles, facial expressions, or other gestures).

Aspects of teamwork also appeared during this research. It was obvious that some teams functioned well together. Nowhere was this more prevalent than in the volleyball league play. Teams commonly functioned smoothly, and it was obvious that some of these individuals had played together before as well.

Additionally components of skill development performance improvement were observed. Children partaking in camp activities, as well as adults that cultivated their team work and playing skills were detectable throughout the duration of the camps and leagues. Such improvements were apparent to the researcher, and were communicated to the researcher via comments made by leaders such as the camp organizer and the CLC director.

It should be noted that often times the sport activities were being held under somewhat lax or flexible rules. There have been various occurrences where teams “picked up” extra players or would have individuals “fill in” on their teams. Additionally, other occurrences of flexibility occurred, such as during volleyball play, when a particular team won the first two games in a two out of three set, most of the time, they would go

ahead and play the third game for the fun of it. There were also numerous instances in which teams were allowed to start with an insufficient number of players. Examples of this included four players against six in volleyball and four on four basketball games. In the later example, the director said to “go ahead and play four on four” (as opposed to the regulation five against five starting line-up). Taking this matter into account even further, the same holds true for workers and officials, such as when one official had to call the game by himself, rather than the regular two person crew. Associated with this, there was a need for workers to commonly fill in where needed. If an absence due to prior commitment or unforeseen circumstance set up a conflict, workers would fill in or do additional tasks to help out in the process of putting on the planned activities. This was demonstrated when officials were running late or there was a need for some other adjustment to be made (i.e. fill in officials of just one official, instead of two).

Additionally, there was a general feeling of willingness to help when needed. When approached by the director or other supervisors, the researcher filled in as scorekeeper or time keeper when needed. Others were also willing and had previous experience or knowledge of such matter could be called upon to fill certain voids when they emerged.

## CONCLUSION

This work explores the use of sport by churches. Aspects pertaining to church provided sport activity, including a case study of a particular Christian Life Center were detailed. Attributes pertaining to this site as well as larger concepts have been expounded on as well.

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