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Sport and Spirituality: An Introduction

By Jim Parry, Simon Robinson, Nick J. Watson and Mark Nesti. Published 2007 by Routledge Press, New York. (xii +214 pp., notes, bibliography, index). ISBN 978-0-415-40483-9 pbk.

Reviewed by Peter M. Hopsicker, Assistant Professor of Kinesiology, Penn State Altoona, Altoona, PA.

Sport and Spirituality provides fresh insight into the expanding examination of the sports experience. Looking beyond the regularly quantified aspects of sport performance, the authors utilize sport psychology, philosophy, ethics, theology and religious studies to examine the spiritual dimension of sport—whether it is described as “flow,” “transcendence,” or the discovery of meaning and value. In four successive yet interwoven sections (divided into three chapters each), the authors develop a working definition of spirituality, address the relationship between religion and sport, suggest how sport psychology could consider the spiritual dimensions in sport, and explore connections between virtues and diverse sport practices.

In Section I, Simon Robinson provides an introduction to the notion of “spirituality” and to the idea of spirituality and sport. He traces the development of spirituality from its exclusive association with organized religion to the more diverse view of spirituality in the postmodern era and the New Age. Robinson argues that spirituality has become increasingly identified as a human quality rather than one strictly of formal religion. Spirituality now plays a bigger role in such things as community and institutional development, wellbeing, health, and personal growth. Robinson argues that these changing roles of spirituality can also be found and provide insight into the nature and purpose of sport.

Robinson then provides a three-fold definition of spirituality—one that is used for the remainder of the text. Spirituality is the awareness and appreciation of the other, the capacity to respond to the other, and the development of significant life meaning based upon all aspects of awareness and appreciation of and response to the other. Robinson further suggests that spirituality is located in experience. It is the capacity to appreciate the other in both similarities and differences. It is something often developed not only in the individual, but also in and through the disciplines and practices of a group or team. This definition stresses commitment, recognition and appreciation of others, and, Robinson argues, it is through this paradigm that spirituality provides a basis for personal identity and growth.

Robinson’s final chapter in the section suggests that the development of spirituality in the individual should be considered a journey rather than something that is attained. Reflection and dialog are needed to develop moral meaning. In turn, an awareness and responsibility to the other grows. With this come skills necessary for responding appropriately to any challenge to individual or group values within those relationships. Sport provides a platform for the development of these ideas—as a place where humans can find significant meaning in their lives through

active spiritual communities, dialogues between communities, and wellbeing in a holistic sense. It is the plurality of sport—its different clubs, professional bodies and organizing institutions—that helps ensure a continual moral dialog among diverse groups and continual commitment and interaction with others.

Section II, authored by Nick J. Watson and John White, addresses the relationship between religion and sport under three distinct topics. The win-at-all-costs culture of modern sport is examined first. Watson and White suggest that a theological reflection on big-business competitive sports reveals a need for “wholesale spiritual rehabilitation.” They identify “pride” as the culprit in this attitude and suggest promoting the virtues of humility, love, self-sacrifice, respect and honor as good starting points for curbing negative consequences of such attitudes.

The historical development of Victorian Muscular Christianity and its contribution to the birth of Modern Sport Ministry in Britain and the United States is the topic of the fifth chapter. In this historical examination, Watson shows how Sports Ministry developed through early connections between sport, manliness, health and morality. This, in turn, laid the foundation for modern day organizations such as Christians in Sport, the Fellowship of Christian Athletes and Athletes in Action.

In the final chapter of this section, Watson examines the authenticity and validity of mystical and sublime experiences in extreme sports. Although characterizing them as “subjective” and “deeply personal,” Watson argues that mystical experiences, those that result in a “direct experience with the supernatural” and provide access to the “realms of the holy,” are difficult to justify in sport. He claims that these types of experiences are better characterized as “deep play” and spiritual expressions of the aesthetic rather than a redemption and rebirth into a new type of reality. Watson is clear not to discourage one from pursuing such experiences, however, stating that such a pursuit can only enlarge our understanding of the world and ourselves.

Section III focuses on showing how sport psychology could consider a spiritual dimension in sport. Here, Mark Nesti argues for existential psychology as the best approach for examining meaning, spirituality and religion as central to human beings. Nesti suggests that this perspective allows for the study of human beings “as persons” (rather than “things”) and subsequently shows how humans make sense of situations and experiences. He emphasizes how people “participate in and bring meaning to the situations experienced in their lives.” His focus is on descriptions provided by the participants themselves, and, therefore, he offers direct insight into the personal meaning each athlete attaches to particular events and experiences.

Nesti’s next chapter discusses the implications that arise from a spiritual account of the human person for those who participate and work in sports. These include the inclusion of the idea of “situated freedom,” a redefining of “personhood,” and a reexamination of the sport psychologist to client-athlete relationship.

In his final chapter of section III, Nesti examines the problems of pain, suffering and sacrifice in sport beyond its mere mental and physical aspects to include a spiritual dimension. The chapter reviews how recent sport psychology literature has dealt with such terms as sacrifice, hardship and despair. He suggests that courage, personality and mental toughness in sport represent more than psychological skills that can be acquired through mental training programs. Rather, they can be understood as evidence of the athlete’s spiritual nature.

The final section of the text considers the development of virtues and the spirit of the game. Robinson examines the Platonic virtues in relation to Olympic sport and suggests the additional inclusion of theological virtues. He argues that virtues are essential to any understanding of spiritually as well as morality. They enable an awareness and appreciation of the other, the capacity to respond to the other, and the development of significant meaning in the individual's life. Such understandings, Robinson argues, can also be found in sports contexts—venues rich with community and relationships as well as a place for critical reflection on individual life meaning.

Jim Parry authors the final two chapters of the book. His first chapter justifies sport and exercise in the school curriculum. He provides a holistic perspective of the student in the educational process and identifies the morally educative possibilities of sport. He sees the educational benefit of developing virtues through individual practice communities and within each sport's particular ethos. Using the ideology of Olympism, Parry argues that the virtues of fairness and equality should take center stage to the development of persons.

In the final chapter of the book, Parry examines Pierre de Coubertin's use of the "religion of athletics" to revive the Olympic Games at the end of the 19th century. Exploring the place of spirituality and religious ceremony in ancient and modern times, Parry reveals how spirituality penetrates the political arena through the Olympic ideals of peace and the ancient idea of Olympic Truce. Parry concludes the volume by suggesting that sport can be seen as providing spiritual practice for our ethical and political values—as an expression of values that weaves meanings of self and independence with the recognition and appreciation of the other.

Sport and Spirituality markets itself as a resource for students of sport and exercise studies, sport coaching, physical education, and sport and health psychology. As an introductory text that explores modern human notions of spirituality in sport, the volume serves its stated purpose and audience. While the book is well organized and thoroughly referenced, its limited number of authors limits the perspectives that could have been taken on the subject matter. Also, because it is introductory in nature, it may not be useful for more sophisticated audiences.

However, the potential use of this volume by intercollegiate athletics practitioners should not be overlooked. Each section can provide valuable insight into the perspectives and thought processes of various participants and interpersonal relationships in collegiate sport. The definition of spirituality provided by Robinson focuses on the approach each person takes with the other person. It is about human interaction, taking individuals at their full worth, and appreciating different perspectives. Intercollegiate sport is filled with such interactions—both on the field and in the athletics office. Arguably, many of the current criticisms of competitive athletics can be linked to the tendency to think of individuals as competitors/adversaries only. A working, spiritual perspective in these situations, one that considers the other as a person, could result in clearer understandings of differing perspectives. Watson and White's section provides some interesting examples of how such a spiritual perspective can affect different sporting practices.

Nesti's section on existential psychology can also be helpful to the practitioner of intercollegiate sports. Nesti clearly explains one effective method of initiating respectful communication between individuals and groups—one that is based in experience. It is a method that focuses on descriptions, feelings, emotions, and

thought provided by the performers themselves. Once understood, this methodology can help intercollegiate sport practitioners more readily accept the expressions and experiences provided by athletes, coaches and even administrators. Finally, the last section reveals how sport is important to the education of individuals. While this is not surprising to many sport practitioners, Robinson and Parry's spiritual take on this issue provides thoughtful insight into the use of sport for the development of virtuous living and personal actualization. They show, with the example of the Olympic Games, that competitive sport can be a platform for moral development for both individuals and institutions. With a spiritual understanding of the individual, consideration of the other, appreciation of the other, and affectively responding to the other, sport practitioners can collectively develop the ethical value of institutions, sports, teams and players. Parry's chapters provide some introductory guidance for achieving such ends.

From its title, *Sport and Spirituality* may not appear to be of great value to the intercollegiate sport practitioner. However, the fresh insight and new perspective on sport provided by the authors can be of value to those interested in seeking a deeper understanding of the individual and group dynamics—of how human beings interact with human beings as persons—ever-present and constantly changing in the practice of intercollegiate athletics.