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The integration of sport and religion has been a contested combination throughout history, with some believing in the compatibility of the two and others arguing that the union creates conflict. Prayer is a specific behavior that introduces religion into athletic domains, and current literature has investigated the use of prayer by team athletes and coaches. Research indicates that team athletes use prayer to enhance performance and strength, to give thanks, to cope with sport difficulties and relax, to pray to stay safe, and to keep sport and the outcome of competition in perspective relative to their perception of God's will. Some athletes pray at specific times, and most think this ritual is effective. Other studies have shown that coaches rely on prayer for guidance and confidence in their role as a leader, and athletes may perceive that prayer can bring teams together. The evidence described thus far comes exclusively from team sport settings; absent from the literature are detailed accounts of non-team-affiliated athletes' experiences of prayer, notably recreational marathon runners. The purpose of this study was to develop a more in-depth understanding of the use of this behavior by these athletes. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten recreational marathoners representing the three religions of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded, and the codes were then grouped into categories and themes. Following the analysis, five themes emerged: long distance running as a space for the use of prayer, prayer to change one's thoughts or outlook, requests to aid in the physical aspects of running performances, prayer for appreciation and thanks, and the effects of prayer on

interactions with others in a running setting. These findings expand upon existing research regarding the uses of prayer in sport by extending our understanding to individual long distance runners. Furthermore, the findings of this study support previous suggestions regarding the spiritual aspect of leisure activities. Lastly, results provide new directions for future research regarding prayer and sport.

THE USE OF PRAYER IN MARATHON RUNNERS

by

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The integration of sport and religion has been a contested combination throughout history. In some contexts, the two constructs are compatible and even beneficial with regards to one another. Coakley (2015) suggests that athletes and coaches use religion within sport in numerous ways: to cope with uncertainty, to stay morally sound, to give meaning to participation in sport, to put sport participation into perspective, to establish team unity, to reaffirm motivation, and to achieve success. In support of this, some athletes have indicated that they use sport as an act of worship and to give glory to God (Hoffman, 1985; Mosley et al., 2015), and coaches appreciate religion as a means of avoiding negative lifestyles and thus promoting athleticism (Rotenberk, 1988). Prebish (1984) asserts that some professional Christian athletes have used their popularity for public evangelism, and organizations such as Athletes in Action and the Fellowship of Christian Athletes help recruit new members to religious affiliations through athletics. Through certain perspectives, sport and religion have the ability to advance and enhance the other.

However, other circumstances may not lend themselves to such a harmonious union. Coakley (2015) acknowledges that standards within the Islamic culture have reduced certain athletic opportunities for women. For example, the coverings Muslim women must wear when exercising and the belief that men should not publicly look upon

women have inhibited international and televised sport participation for Muslim women. Additionally, Chinese philosophies promote agreeable living and discourage aspects of physical domination (Coakley, 2015), which are undoubtedly large features of certain sport performances. Other normative values of sport have also created conflict for athletes. In attempts to deal with personal internal disagreements between their own morals and sport ideals, some athletes have introduced or reintroduced Christianity into their lives; while some were able to successfully use religion as a coping mechanism in their sport, others continued to struggle and eventually withdrew from sport entirely (Stevenson, 1997). In situations such as these, religion and athletics are unable to effectively mix.

Hochstetler (2009) argues that the most visible connection sport has with religion is through prayer. Although some question the authenticity of public prayer (Czech & Bullet, 2007; Hochstetler, 2009; Prebish, 1984), several studies have investigated the uses, experiences, and perceptions of this ritual in athletes, coaches, and spectators (Bleak & Frederick, 1998; Czech et al., 2004; Czech & Bullet, 2007; Egli et al., 2014; Hochstetler, 2009; Mosley et al., 2015; Murray et al., 2005). Czech et al. (2004) identified four themes for athletes' uses of prayer through interviews with elite Division I Christian athletes: performance-related prayer, prayer as part of a routine, prayer to give thanks, and prayer to accept the influence of God's will on competition outcomes. Similarly, prayer themes that have emerged for Division I Christian coaches include relying on God's guidance in dealing with team issues and coping in sport, understanding the role of coaching as having an impact on younger athletes, recognizing the importance

of individual and team prayer types, and wanting to have a subtle influence in the sense that religion would not be forced or imposed upon the athletes (Egli et al., 2014).

Research has also indicated that sport participants tend to use prayer at times specifically as a coping mechanism (Czech et al., 2004; Czech & Bullet, 2007; Gould et al., 1993; Park, 2000), and athletes suggest that prayer can improve the cohesiveness of teams (Murray et al., 2005); notably, much of the research on prayer concerns these team athletes. An important avenue of exploration then is the use of prayer in non-team-affiliated athletes.

Higdon (1978) speculates that solitary running could perhaps allow individuals to practice their religion, and indeed, research has revealed the use of prayer in runners. For example, Acevedo et al. (1992) demonstrated the use of prayer and spiritual thought in ultramarathoners, who may draw upon divine strength during performances, and, comparable with the team athlete literature, marathoners may use prayer to cope with difficulties during races (Buman et al., 2008). Nonetheless, to this author's knowledge, an in-depth qualitative study on the experiences and perceptions of prayer in non-team affiliated distance runners has not yet been conducted. Long distance runners arguably spend large amounts of time alone in their sport, working through problems, against physical demands, and toward goals without the aid of a coach or teammates. Given the possible distinctions between prayer use for these athletes and their team counterparts and the fact that runners have introduced prayer into their sport, the purpose of this study is to investigate the lived experiences and perceptions of prayer in long distance runners.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

#### **Preamble**

Throughout history, sport and religion have been combined in myriad ways, and this “connection between religion and sport continues in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, most visibly in connection with prayer” (Hochstetler, 2009, p. 325). This literature review will first provide a brief overview of ways in which religion in general and sport have interacted, both successfully and adversely. A more in-depth discussion will follow regarding the literature concerned with prayer and sport. Qualitative research has mainly focused on the use and perceptions of prayer with team athletes and coaches, but what is lacking are detailed depictions of these experiences in non-team affiliated athletes, specifically recreational long distance runners. The review will consider the literature that identifies runners’ use of prayer and then articulate a need to investigate this religious practice further.

#### **Sport and Religion**

Literature, both empirical and anecdotal, suggests that the connection between sport and religion is complex, and Coakley (2015) proposes that this is due to the “diverse ways, depending on the experiences, relationships, and interests of individuals and groups” (p. 508) in which the two are combined. Religion has, at times, used sport as

a platform for promotion. Many professional Christian athletes have used their popularity as an opportunity for public evangelism, and some organizations help recruit new members to religious affiliations through athletics (Prebish, 1984). Prebish (1984) identifies two of these organizations: the Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) and Athletes in Action (AIA). The FCA appoints older athletes and coaches to “recruit younger ones to Christ” (p. 308), while AIA members, made up of former collegiate athletes, give religious talks during special competitions against current collegiate athletes. Similarly, some religious groups hold the belief that physically strengthening the body encourages spiritual growth and moral development and therefore use sports as a gateway to attract new members (Coakley, 2015). Coakley suggests the growth of the YMCA in the late 1800s and early 1900s can be attributed to these beliefs. Originally founded as a shelter for London men to study the Bible and pray (The YMCA, n.d.a), the YMCA began to incorporate such programs as the “Hi-Y” club that promoted “Christian character through fostering speech, *sportsmanship* [emphasis added], and scholastic achievement” (The YMCA, n.d.b).

In addition to these examples of how religion uses sport as a metaphorical pulpit, sport also makes use of religion and religious practices. Based upon past studies and anecdotal information, Coakley (2015) has noted seven ways that athletes and coaches use religion within sport: to cope with uncertainty, to stay morally sound, to give meaning to participation in sport, to put sport participation into perspective, to establish team unity, to reaffirm motivation, and to achieve success. Others have also indicated that both coaches and athletes alike can view religious involvement in sport favorably. Some

team managers encourage religious participation, believing it can lead to better athleticism through avoidance of negative lifestyles (Rotenberk, 1988). Hoffman (1985) presents various opinions of athletes on the role of religion in sport, stating that they can use their performance on the field as a spiritual offering to God by playing to the best of their ability that He has given them. Collectively, the athletes suggest that when the focus is less on competition or winning and more geared toward quality performances and genuine motivation, sport can be an act of worship and thankfulness. Similarly, Mosley et al. (2015) questioned five elite athletes with Christian worldviews to discover how they incorporate spirituality into their respective sport. One respondent said that his purpose was to use his “talents to bring glory to His name” (p. 375) and that he relies on God to cope with the pressure he feels as a professional athlete, while another believes that God has helped him learn to react to the multiple, at times conflicting, emotions and challenges of his athletic career.

Sport and religion are not always complimentary, however, and the combination of the two can sometimes be seen as an incompatible pairing. Stevenson (1997) interviewed 31 new or renewed Christian athletes who were currently competing or had previously competed at elite levels. The discussions revealed that these athletes had been living in personal conflict when playing their sport and succumbing to “normative values of this competitive sport culture” (p. 243). Many commented that the absolute importance of winning they perceived in sport culture caused a problem. They explained that losing became a personal defeat, and thus they would feel compelled to take any action in order to win, such as harming another player. For example, one athlete admitted that he had

injured another player to the extent that an ambulance was required. These athletes also felt as if popularity was an important concept within sport culture. They believed that in order to remain popular, there was a constant need to reaffirm their social status and self-worth through sporting success which often included playing through pain and injury. Some of the male athletes claimed that others seemed to expect their sport to rank first in their lives over academics and relationships. In order to handle these personal conflicts, these athletes turned to Christianity through the Athletes in Action organization. After introducing or reintroducing Christianity into their lives, many were able to use religion as a successful coping mechanism while others continued to struggle with these cultural sport values and withdrew from sport entirely.

Furthermore, Christianity is not the only religion for which conflict exists when affiliated with sport. Certain patriarchal Islamic beliefs discourage female participation in sport. The bodily coverings that Muslim women wear are required even when exercising, and men are not permitted to look publicly upon women. Due to these restrictions, some athletic opportunities have been minimized for Muslim women, such as Olympic participation (Coakley, 2015), suggesting another area of friction between sport and religion. Similarly, Chinese philosophies do not condone physical domination of another but rather encourage a harmonious life (Coakley, 2015); one could imagine how a competitive sport culture does not fall in line with these beliefs.

This consideration of experiences and opinions about sport and religion are important. Clearly, some appreciate the integration and believe sport can be an act of worship, and religion can enhance performance, help sport participants to cope with

pressure or conflicts regarding perceived sport norms, give meaning to athletics, establish moral lives, and put sport into perspective. Others perceive the two as incompatible and believe that the core values are too different to be merged. With this in mind, the following discussion will be directed toward prayer, a behavior associated with religion that has been seen and experienced in sport.

### **Sport and Prayer**

**Athletes and Prayer.** An initial understanding of the relationship between sport and religion, presented above, is important for any research investigating the use of prayer in athletics, as prayer is a specific behavior that introduces religion into this domain, and there is a growing body of literature examining the use of prayer in sport. In a study on the investigation of lived prayer experiences in athletes, Czech et al. (2004) purposefully selected nine members from NCAA Division I football, baseball, soccer, wrestling, and diving teams who had been seen praying during a performance and were Christian athletes from AIA, the FCA, or other Christian church groups. They were interviewed and instructed to discuss a use of prayer in athletics, whether it was before, during, or after a sporting event, and were subsequently questioned further for elaboration. The analysis of these interviews produced four themes for the use of prayer: prayer used to enhance performance, prayer as a routine ritual conducted at a certain time, prayer to display thankfulness, and prayer to accept the outcome of the competition as God's will. For example, athletes reported using prayer to reduce stress, nervousness, and tension during performances and to play to the best of their abilities. Some maintained a specific time to pray, they thanked God and appreciated sport, and they used

prayer to keep the end result of the athletic event in perspective and to learn from loss. Similarly, Mosley et al. (2015) interviewed five elite basketball, football, and track and field athletes to understand how they personally incorporated their spirituality into their participation in sport. In addition to performing for God and faithfully believing He will help them attain their goals, these athletes also revealed the use of prayer. One participant used prayer for mental preparation and relaxation and referenced an acquaintance who would occasionally send him prayers to encourage him in his sport. Another athlete prayed for protection for himself and teammates, while one insisted, “Pre-game prayer is a must” (p. 379). Mosley et al. (2015) elaborate on the benefits of spiritually-based practices in sport psychology consulting while Czech and colleagues (2004) emphasize the use of prayer as a coping mechanism for these athletes in situations involving threats of injury, dealing with winning or losing, or relieving worry.

Earlier studies have also identified prayer as a specific coping strategy for athletes. Gould, Eklund, and Jackson (1993) interviewed twenty members of the 1988 Olympic wrestling team in order to categorize coping strategies used during competition. They reported that these coping methods could be classified into the four general dimensions of thought control strategies, task focus strategies, emotional control strategies, and behavioral based strategies. Two of the wrestlers used prayer as a thought control strategy in which they concentrated on “an appeal for divine intervention, inspiration, or support” (p. 89). Similarly, through interviews with 180 male and female elite Korean athletes, Park (2000) identified seven general dimensions of coping strategies in sport, including prayer. Forty athletes reported using prayer to manage stress

by such means as requesting divine intervention or to entrust God with worries in order to play to their highest ability. Czech and Bullet (2007) studied 19 NCAA Division II collegiate athletes who self-identified as Christian. They assessed perceptions of prayer with the Johnson-Chan Prayer Effectiveness Survey (JCPES), the Religious Behavior Survey (RBS), personal interviews, and prayer meeting observations. The JCPES measures the perceived effect of prayer in different categories, such as trust and renewal of emotional energy, and the RBS inquires about religious practices and thinking. The researchers concluded from the results that prayer is commonly used to help with relaxation during stressful times in a performance, and they suggest prayer may be a beneficial coping mechanism for religious athletes. Other reasons for prayer use included to give glory to a higher power, to remain safe, and to play to the best of one's ability. The majority of these athletes prayed before a game, and all indicated that the intensity and the meaning of prayer, as well as its frequency, increased with the importance of the sport performance.

To examine the mental qualities associated with elite sport, Vernacchia and colleagues (2000) interviewed 15 Olympic track and field athletes. They were asked about their dreams of becoming Olympians, developmental factors, obstacles and how they overcame them, mental preparation and qualities, and future advice. Answers to these questions gave way to emergent themes including developmental concerns, socio-economic factors, mental skills and attitudes, and spiritual and religious factors. Three of the respondents indicated that religious or spiritual beliefs were important developmentally. For example, one athlete attributed healed hamstrings and sport

dedication to God. When discussing the overcoming of obstacles, an athlete admitted to praying for “strength and guidance to do better” (p. 14) after becoming injured.

Vernacchia et al. (2000) report that some athletes pray to “aid them in remaining faithful to goals and beliefs regarding their athletic abilities and competencies” (p. 22).

Importantly, prayer in sport is believed to be helpful. Bleak and Frederick (1998), interested in the use and perceived effectiveness of rituals in sport, questioned 87 male and 20 female volunteer athletes from NCAA Division I football, gymnastics, and track teams. The researchers measured the perceived level of importance of sport success, locus of control, sport anxiety, and the use of superstitious behaviors and their effectiveness on a one to five Likert scale. The application of certain rituals varied across sport, as football players reported the most frequent use of prayer, gymnasts reported more appearance-related rituals, and track and field athletes consistently reported that they warmed up with the same routine prior to each meet; however, the athletes from all three sports indicated that they perceived prayer to be highly effective, with mean ratings of effectiveness between “neutral” and “very effective” for rituals involving prayer. Czech and Bullet’s (2007) results from the RBS also indicate a high effectiveness rating for prayer. On a scale from one to ten, with one denoting “none” and ten denoting “very much,” the athletes answered the question, “How much do you believe in the effectiveness of prayer?” with an average value of 8.84. These results suggest that the perceived effectiveness of prayer could be a reason for its continued use.

This accumulated knowledge of prayer use in team-affiliated athletes suggests they use this behavior to pray for performance and strength, to give thanks, and to cope

with sport difficulties and relax; they pray to stay safe and to keep sport in the perspective of God's will. These athletes generally find it helpful, and some pray at specific times as a type of sport ritual.

**Teams, Coaches, and Prayer.** Looking beyond the individual team athlete, Murray and colleagues (2005) combined qualitative and quantitative methods to determine whether or not there is a difference in team cohesion and spirituality in NCAA Division I female softball players on teams that pray and teams that do not pray. Ninety-two athletes from six schools completed the Group Environment Questionnaire and the Spirituality in Sports Test, which measure team cohesion and spirituality in sports, respectively, along with questions regarding the frequency of prayer and open-ended questions inquiring about their feelings on team prayer. No significant differences in the quantitative measures of team cohesion and spirituality in sports were found between teams who pray and teams who did not pray. However, athletes who prayed individually for teammates had higher levels of spirituality, and qualitative measures demonstrated that the majority of the athletes, whether they were members of a team that prayed together or not, felt as if prayer brought teams together. Likewise, those on teams that did pray commonly responded that they experienced cohesion through team prayer. Additionally, softball players who participated in prayer cited reasons such as to give glory to God, to give thanks to God, to aid with focus, and to pray that they remain safe. Notably, one team member commented that she thinks "everyone has their own reasons for praying" (p. 236), emphasizing that although teams may pray together, individuals differ in their perception of the meaning of prayer.

In addition to athletes, coaches also use prayer in sport. Employing methods comparable to Czech et al.'s (2004) examination of athletes' involvement with prayer, Egli et al. (2014) investigated Christian coaches' lived experiences of this behavior. Three male and three female NCAA Division I soccer, basketball, track and field, and swimming coaches, identifying as Christian and supporting the mission of the FCA, were asked, "When you think about praying as a coach, what comes to mind?", along with follow up probing questions. Four themes for coaches' use of prayer were reported, including relying on God's guidance, prayer types, subtle influence, and roles of coaching. Relying on God's guidance involved the use of prayer for team issues and giving sound advice, and the theme of prayer types distinguished between team prayer and individual prayer. The "subtle influence" theme referenced the thought that these coaches did not want to force religion on their players but rather to provide a religious environment if desired. Finally, the coaches used prayer in hopes of being a good example for the athletes and to have a positive impact on their life.

These two studies may also demonstrate that prayer in a team setting is possibly dominated by an authority figure or the status quo. When elaborating on the seven ways in which athletes and coaches may use religion in sport, Coakley (2015) states that "some [coaches] have used Christian beliefs as rallying points for their teams" but that "[t]his use of religion can backfire when athletes object to expectations to pray or profess agreement with religious statements" (p. 529). Again, this "backfiring" points to the importance of the individualized and personal nature of prayer.

**Sincerity of Prayer.** Displayed prayer in sport can bring about concerns regarding genuineness. Almost 80 percent of the athletes interviewed in the Czech and Bullet (2007) study indicated that they did not believe most professional athletes were truthful when publically proclaiming their faith, and many referred to their actions on and off the field as hypocritical. Moreover, athletes themselves may experience dissonance between prayer and their own thoughts. For example, some of the softball players in Murray et al.'s (2005) investigation of prayer and team cohesion admitted to a feeling of hypocrisy and insincerity when praying with their team. Hochstetler (2009) focuses on several identified tensions regarding the use of prayer in sport settings. He posits that prayer for assistance or for oneself essentially asks for divine bias. One could view these requests as either a dependence upon God as a provider or, alternatively, a plea for another to fail. Hochstetler (2009) also notes that others' interpretations of prayer may be areas of tension. Some fans may admire an athlete praying during a game, while others may find the behavior offensive. Therefore, the perceived sincerity of prayer in sport could potentially impact an athlete's adoption, maintenance, or renouncement of this behavior.

### **Running and Prayer**

The research presented thus far narrates how team-affiliated athletes, coaches, and spectators use and perceive prayer, but this literature only provides a glimpse of the use of this behavior in recreational long distance runners. For example, Higdon (1978) speculates that solitary running could perhaps allow individuals to practice their religion. After talking with priests and ministers, these discussions revealed that some religious

figures pray while running multiple miles in the morning. They believe that running outside can allow them to see nature, which they perceive as a way to appreciate God's glory. Research has also briefly identified that the use of prayer is evident in runners of longer distances. Acevedo et al. (1992) investigated cognitive orientations of 112 ultramarathoners who were registered for one of two 100 mile races through the use of questionnaires and open-ended questions. As a group, these runners were noted to be highly competitive and confident in their sport, as measured by the Sport Orientation Questionnaire and the Trait Sport-Confidence Inventory, respectively. Additionally, the fact that these endurance athletes scored lower on win orientation and higher on goal orientation implies that these runners are more concerned with achieving their own running goals and less concerned with winning or losing. Open-ended reports revealed the use of prayer and spiritual thought while running and suggest that these runners may draw upon strength from God by means of their thoughts during performance. One ultramarathoner responded, "Instead of a mantra, I say the rosary [a type of prayer]; it's easy to do with a catholic background. It always gets me through" (p. 247). These researchers state that the cognitive orientations of ultramarathoners set them apart as a unique group; however, runners of other distances have also used prayer in their sport. Buman et al. (2008) explored recreational marathon runners' described characteristics of "hitting the wall," the euphemism for the point at which the glycogen in the body has been exhausted, and their personal responses to this phenomenon. Using the Road Runners Club of America's criteria, Buman and colleagues (2008) defined recreational marathon runners as those "who had completed at least one marathon and had not

qualified for champion classification based on age-adjusted finishing times for males and females” (p. 286). The 57 marathoners were recruited from two marathon running listserv posts with links to the study website and online open-ended questions, and the coping strategies depicted were categorized into cognitive strategies, emotion-focused coping, race-related physical efforts, and no strategies. These coping strategies were further categorized, and cognitive strategies were bracketed into the use of relaxation, association, dissociation, self-talk, mental reframing, race goal renegotiation, visualization, and will power. Mental reframing and will power were the most common cognitive strategies utilized, followed by dissociation techniques, including the use of prayer, although the researchers did not describe this practice in detail. The marathoners generally reported using more than one method to cope with “hitting the wall”, and after examining relationships between coping strategies and performance, determined by most recent finishing time, higher performing athletes tended to use cognitive strategies to enhance performance while lower performers used strategies to reduce pain or discomfort. Thus, runners have differing arrays of coping methods, of which prayer is a part for some. Although these studies do indicate that runners have used prayer in their sport, neither explored much detail regarding the prayer employed.

## **Conclusion**

Research demonstrates and describes the experiences of prayer in team-affiliated athletes and coaches and their perceptions of the use of this behavior, and studies have also revealed that runners have used prayer in their sport; however, little is known about the detailed, lived experiences and perceptions of prayer in individual non-team affiliated

recreational marathon runners. Due to certain characteristics of the sport of running and situational factors, recreational marathoners may utilize prayer differently from what has been shown in the literature regarding team-affiliated athletes. In support of this, Bleak and Frederick (1998) conclude that gymnasts, who report more ritual use than other athletes, may do so due to the individual nature of their performance; however, these gymnasts were part of a collegiate team. Distance runners spend long amounts of time alone in their sport, working through problems, against physical demands, and toward goals without the aid of a coach or teammates. As identified above, tensions exist regarding the use of public prayer in athletics, yet recreational marathoners may not experience these tensions to such a degree, as their actions are usually not broadcast to a large audience, nor do they interact with teammates or coaches.

Watson and Czech (2005), who consider the importance and implications for sport psychology and the use of prayer, seem to support the suggestion of a prayer examination in this group of athletes. In a review of the literature regarding the use of prayer in sport, these researchers reflected upon the benefits of this behavior and conclude that a renewal of religious practices might help a struggling athlete cope with difficulties and maintain perspective. They also suggest that future research look at the use of prayer in novice and lower level athletes. Balague (1999), in writing about her experiences as a sport psychology consultant, insists that “spirituality or religion is often a big part of many athletes’ lives” (p. 91) and that it is important for professionals in the field to understand how to incorporate these aspects into their practice. Mosley and colleagues’ (2015) interviews with Christian athletes support this suggestion as well, as

most of these athletes were keen to see spirituality combined with sport psychology services. Not only does this study have the potential to further highlight this recommendation, but it may also enlighten parents, friends, and other support systems of religious runners as to the significance and possible benefit of prayer in running.

Studies involving prayer that have been conducted thus far suggest that team-affiliated athletes and coaches use prayer to cope and relax, to pray to stay safe, to thank God and rely on His guidance, to put sport into perspective and appreciate their abilities, and to pray for performance and strength (Czech et al., 2004; Czech & Bullet, 2007; Egli et al., 2014; Gould et al., 1993; Mosley et al., 2013; Park, 2000; Vernacchia et al., 2000). Team athletes generally consider prayer an effective strategy (Bleak & Frederick, 1998; Czech & Bullet, 2007), and prayer may bring teams together (Murray et al., 2005), but questions of sincerity arise when prayer is used publically (Czech & Bullet, 2007; Hochstetler, 2009; Prebish, 1984). More general research has demonstrated the use of prayer in runners and gives some indication as to how prayer is employed, specifically using this behavior to cope (Buman et al., 2008). Considering the above research evidence, the potential distinction between how prayer is used by team-affiliated athletes versus non-team affiliated athletes, and the reality that the sport of running has incorporated the practice of prayer, future research should examine the lived experiences and perceptions of prayer in long distance runners. To this author's knowledge, an in-depth qualitative study on the experiences and perceptions of prayer in long distance runners has yet to be conducted and will add to the knowledge base. Through semi-

structured interviews, the use and assessments of prayer in long distance runners is more profoundly clarified.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

#### **Participants**

Ten recreational marathon runners (four female and six male) were recruited to participate in this study. All were required to be 18 years or older and be considered a recreational marathoner. For the purposes of this study, a recreational marathoner was defined as one who has completed at least two full marathons, one who does not receive sponsorships or monetary rewards for running marathons, and one who is not affiliated with a running team. Affiliation with a running team was further defined as being part of an organized group that is led by an authority figure who dictates workout routines and collective practice schedules and that competes in racing events against other organized groups.

Furthermore, the runners were required to have used prayer related to their running and be affiliated with a religion and/or consider themselves religious. Christianity is the most prevalent religion in the United States (Pew Research Center, 2015), and the extant research has focused mainly on the lived experiences of prayer in Christian athletes (Watson & Nesti, 2005). The purpose of this study was to investigate long distance runners' uses of prayer, not to investigate Christian practices in sport. Although I identify as a Christian, I have a strong desire not only for this study to be inclusive, but to also learn and then offer knowledge about the use of prayer in running

from those of other religions. In order to promote communion, or “a commitment to meaningful connection through humanity, dignity, respect, and equity practices and values” (Bettez, 2015, p. 939), runners from all religious affiliations were welcome to take part in this study. I attempted to portray my openness to multiple perspectives and religions through my recruiting process by encouraging this participation.

The participants were given the option either to select their own pseudonyms or to allow me to choose a name for them. Lexi’s Dad (a self-chosen name to pay tribute to his pet Lexi), Harvey, Paula, Kip, Lucy, Esther, William, Doug, Jerry, and Beast all agreed to interview for this study. Nine of the participants identified as white or Caucasian and one identified as Middle Eastern; additionally, seven identified as Christian, two as Jewish, and one as Muslim. Their ages ranged from 23 to 52 yrs ( $M = 36.70$ ,  $SD = 12.62$ ), and they had been running marathons from two years to over thirty years, each having amassed between two and twenty marathons ( $M = 6.30$ ,  $SD = 6.20$ ). Most of the participants take part in other endurance events in addition to full marathons, such as half or full Ironmans and ultramarathons. Table 1 summarizes the demographic information for the participants.

*Table 1*

*Participant Demographics*

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Race	Religious Affiliation	Number of Marathons
Beast	Female	34	Caucasian	Christian	3
Doug	Male	52	Caucasian	Christian	20
Esther	Female	26	Caucasian	Christian	2
Harvey	Male	35	Middle Eastern	Muslim	3
Jerry	Male	23	Caucasian	Jewish	4
Kip	Male	23	Caucasian	Christian	6
Lexi's Dad	Male	52	Caucasian	Jewish	15
Lucy	Female	24	Caucasian	Christian	2
Paula	Female	50	Caucasian	Christian	2
William	Male	48	Caucasian	Christian	6

**Procedure**

The participants were recruited through convenience sampling and snowball sampling. Seven were recruited through snowball sampling after I contacted acquaintances I knew personally and who were involved in running. On one occasion, after asking if a contact knew of anyone who would be willing to be interviewed, an acquaintance requested to be a part of the study himself. Two additional participants offered to interview for the study after reading the research information posted on running-related Facebook pages. Although I also contacted several marathon administrators and requested dissemination of my study information to marathon registrants, no participants were recruited from this method. All those involved in the study signed a consent form informing them that their participation was voluntary, that they could withdraw at any time, and that the interview would be audio-recorded, and

they provided demographic information either through filling out a demographics form or emailing their answers. I screened for the aforementioned inclusion criteria through email, phone, or in person correspondence prior to the interview, and interviews were conducted either over the telephone, in person, or through the use of Google Hangouts, a computer video chat technology. All participants were thanked and told that they would be contacted again within the next few months for an optional member check of the results of the data.

Interview questions were developed prior to recruitment and piloted with two acquaintances, one Christian yoga enthusiast and one Jewish gymnast. Although neither were marathon runners, the purpose of this brief piloting was to ensure the questions were thorough and made sense to a religious audience. One additional question was added after these two pilot sessions, and the following final set of questions guided the semi-structured interviews in the study:

1. You mentioned you are \_\_\_\_\_. Tell me about what it means to pray in your religion.

Probes: For what reasons do you pray in your religion?

2. Tell me about your use of prayer as it connects to being a marathon runner.

Probes: When do you use prayer? How long have you been using prayer? What do you pray about? How do you use prayer as a runner? For what reasons do you pray?

3. How does your use of prayer affect you as a runner mentally?

Probes: How does praying affect your emotions as a runner? How does running affect your thoughts as a runner?

4. How does your use of prayer affect you as a runner physically?

Probes: How does it affect your behavior? How does using prayer change the experience of running for you?

5. How has your use of prayer evolved?
6. Tell me about differences you experience when you use prayer while/before/after running as opposed to when you run without praying.
7. Tell me about any differences between your use of prayer in races and your use of prayer during other runs.
8. How does your use of prayer affect your experiences with others?  
Probes: How does prayer affect your interactions with other runners? How does it affect your perceptions of other runners? How does it affect your interactions with race spectators? How does it affect your perceptions of race spectators?
9. Given that I'm interested in marathon runners' use of prayer, is there anything else you'd like to tell me that I might not have thought to ask?

### **Positionality**

The purpose of this research was to explore the lived experiences and perceptions of the use of prayer in recreational marathon runners. Although I did enter the research process with the hope that positive findings from my discussions with these runners could potentially inspire other religious athletes to incorporate prayer into their

sport, the primary intention was to understand and explain, and therefore I am positioned within an interpretive paradigm (Glesne, 2016).

As mentioned, I identify as a Christian, and I desired the inclusion of other religions in the study. I acknowledged the value in embracing other voices in this research, and while my religion did not seem to present any noticeable biases during the interviews or data analysis, my personal definition of prayer did. I perceive prayer as a conversation with God that usually involves a request or an expression of thankfulness. As such, I admittedly struggled conceptualizing and discussing alternate definitions in some interviews. I consistently reminded myself of the specific individuals' meaning of prayer throughout our conversations, often making notes to which I could refer if needed. Furthermore, I use prayer during my running solely to attempt to enhance my own physical performance or to appreciate the completion of a personally acceptable run. When speaking with the participants of the study, it became clear, in my opinion, that many used prayer for much more altruistic reasons. Not only did this make me question my own participation in the sport, but at times I felt compelled to explore these seemingly more "positive" uses to a greater extent; however, I did recognize this tendency. In my interviews, I went back to question participants regarding topics that were stated but not fully explored, and in my analysis, I attempted to portray each theme adequately and honestly, without emphasizing one over the others.

### **Data Analysis**

During the interview process, I kept notes referring to main points, additional questions, and body language, when applicable, to aid in my analysis. I transcribed the

audio-recorded interviews verbatim within two weeks after they were recorded and listened to them again while reading the transcriptions to ensure accuracy. Once I stopped collecting data, I began my phase of initial coding (Saldaña, 2009) where I manually attributed codes to condense the data and to link similar instances together (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). I kept analytic memos (Glesne, 2016) while I coded to reflect upon my own thoughts, and I found myself asking questions and jotting down prompts regarding my coding process. For example, I wrote “remind myself not all interviews must have all similar codes” (analytic memo, November 30<sup>th</sup>, 2016), as I found myself often wanting the codes ascribed to one participant’s words to carry into another’s. Although natural to search for “repetitive patterns” and “consistencies in human affairs” (Saldaña, 2009, p. 5), exploring discrepancies was also necessary in this analysis. Upon my second round of coding, I had a better idea of what all participants’ data were explaining. I coded the interviews in a different order from my first round to guard against any unintentional influencing of codes and created a codebook depicting those words or phrases assigned to each individual’s interview. The codes did not differ greatly between both rounds of coding, and once the data were indexed with codes, I grouped the codes together to form overarching categories (Saldaña, 2009). I gave each category a section in the codebook where I wrote short descriptions of how participants involved in the category contributed to it. Through thematic analysis (Glesne, 2016), I searched for patterns within and between the categories to identify themes regarding the use of prayer in long distance runners. After reflecting upon the categories initially identified, most became themes in

and of themselves. Table 2 provides examples of raw data, the codes attributed to the data, the original categories, and the final themes.

Table 2

Data Analysis Examples

	Raw data example	Code	Category	Theme
	"Or if I'm really like, you know, trying to break a PR, and I'm, I'm struggling, you know, just a quick thought like, 'Oh, I could really use some help right now.'"	Request	Running-related requests	Requests to aid in physical performances
	"And, you know, it's, we share that struggle of loving, loving people who are not lovable, lovable. And so that's a lot of times what we pray about."	Support	Others and the effect of prayer	The effects of prayer on interactions with others in a running setting
28	"And um, realizing that the, you know, things that are bringing me stress, you know, at work or, or wherever else are, you know, small potatoes to, to um, what so many people are dealing with."	Perspective	Mental aspects	Prayer to change one's thoughts or outlook
	"I feel like I'm repenting, I'm admitting guilt, and I'm telling, I'm, I'm just that it's - discovering my short falls, and now it's time for me to fix it, to think differently, to stay more positive."	Reset	Mental aspects	Prayer to change one's thoughts or outlook
	"And ask for love, and ask for wisdom and guidance."	Request	Non-running-related requests	Prayer to change one's thoughts or outlook
	"Every time my thoughts shifted to like how much, I dunno, my knee hurt or how hot it was or - just tried to keep my mind sort of generally on the things that they had said that they wanted first."	Dissociate	Mental aspects	Prayer to change one's thoughts or outlook

After describing the findings, I sent a draft to the participants to read through as a member check (Glesne, 2016), asking if they agreed with my interpretations of their words in order to ensure trustworthiness of the data. None of the participants required any edits.

Interview excerpts presented in the results and discussion sections have been edited to remove any speech disfluencies. Additionally, several of the participants have unique experiences or creations that would possibly identify them in this study. To maintain confidentiality, when necessary, I refer to these instances vaguely. Although potentially sacrificing some of the trustworthiness of the data (Glesne, 2016), honoring my commitment to privacy is of higher importance.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

Through the analysis of these ten interviews with recreational marathoners, five themes emerged: long distance running as a space for the use of prayer, prayer to change one's thoughts or outlook, requests to aid in physical performances, prayer for appreciation and thanks, and the effects of prayer on interactions with others in a running setting. In the following sections, I will explore these themes in depth. I believe it is important to note that these themes were not the only motifs revealed throughout the interview process; for example, a few runners discussed the idea that running could produce "inspired thought" from a divine source. However, the potential theme of "inspired thought" was less developed than other ideas and so was ultimately considered to contribute to more pronounced themes. Likewise, the final themes do have overlapping pieces. One such case is the use of "prayer miles;" two of the participants discussed this concept, which ended up supporting the majority of the themes, not just one. The theme of "prayer to change one's thoughts or outlook" contains instances of dissociation, or prayer to take one's mind off of pains and aches, which arguably could also be considered a "physical request." It was the way in which the participants spoke of this change as transcending the activity of running, as well as the fact that this request pertained to mental focus rather than actual physical relief, which supported my decision as to how to code this response. It is my hope that identifying these matters up front adds

to the trustworthiness of the study and a better understanding of how the interviews were analyzed and how the themes were developed.

It is also of value to discuss variations in the runners' beliefs and perceptions. Therefore, in this chapter I will briefly touch upon the discrepancies in opinions regarding differences between races and training runs that materialized through the interviews, and I will begin with an overview of the participants' use of prayer, including their personal definitions.

### **Prayer: An Overview**

“What is prayer? Is what I'm doing prayer? . . . Religion is a deeply personal frame that you have to develop on your own. I don't think it has meaning [until] it has meaning to you personally.” Lexi's Dad's words capture the essence of the participants' experience and understanding of their own prayer development. Many spoke of their prayer having evolved throughout their life, shifting from prayer that was not serving them to their more meaningful prayer use today, defined in their own terms, and differences in definitions did arise between the religions, which may be of interest to note. For many of the Christian participants, prayer is a conversation with God, and this communication allows for the sense of a deeper relationship. The perceived “connection” comforts the runners, and they feel as if they can honestly disclose their emotions, ask for assistance, and reflect upon and be grateful for many aspects of their lives. The two Jewish runners differed in their prayer use; one's definition of prayer paralleled that of the meanings ascribed by the Christian participants while the other perceived prayer as a means of meditation and appreciation and as an act of mindfulness. The Muslim

participant noted that “prayer is supposed to make you feel better, . . . safe, . . . [and] secure.” As such, his running became his personal prayer. During my interviews, I accepted each individual’s definition of prayer, and although the participants’ characterizations of prayer differed in some ways, their stories and explanations shared commonalities, thus unearthing the five themes.

The participants’ tailored uses of prayer came about in different ways. Many found their spiritual outlet with age and exposure, while others had certain “epiphanies” that led them to their prayer use. Still others admitted that their prayer changed simply through maturing in their faith and reworking their priorities. From these explanations, it became clear that prayer is a dynamic construct, changing with its initiator; thus, my interpretation of the participants’ uses and perceptions of prayer represent a snapshot in time, subject to change throughout their lives as well as running careers.

### **Long Distance Running as a Space for the Use of Prayer**

The act of long distance running provides a specific space and context for the participants to pray, and this was evident when they spoke of training runs as well as full marathon races. Regarding the former, long training runs carve out alone time in the day to “think without interruption” and possibly receive divinely inspired thought. Both William and Lucy provided examples in which God may “[pop] in your head” while running, praying, and contemplating life, and Doug insisted that “marathon running makes [his] prayer connection . . . stronger and more direct” due to the ease with which he can communicate with God while running. Harvey added to this when he stated that “long distance running is what creates that time in my head [to] ask questions and try to

seek answers.” Furthermore, running, as opposed to other modes of transportation, allows one to connect with God’s creation and nature in a different way, thus motivating prayers of appreciation and wonder. According to Beast, “[you] see so many more things that you would otherwise miss – the beautiful colors, the smells, the many different trees, depending on where you are, or buildings, or just life that may be passed by in a faster vehicle.” These longer runs also provoke other prayers, such as those for assistance, since at times these outings are challenging and boast a high level of physical difficulty. Esther spoke more to this idea when she revealed that the demanding space that long distance running creates actually allows her to grow with God as it presents a challenge to her faith:

[It’s] really easy for me to love an activity that I’m really good at and that doesn’t challenge me, but it’s really hard to love an activity and to still participate in an activity that is really, really hard. Physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, [long distance running] is very difficult . . . I feel more in tune with my faith because I have to continuously ask for help and ask for guidance.

Racing a marathon also supplies a space for prayer, albeit slightly differently than when running for training. Lucy and Lexi’s Dad use the twenty-six miles of a marathon quite deliberately; they practice what Lucy termed “prayer miles,” in which they devote one mile of the race to an individual who has had an impact on or added meaning to their lives. Lucy loops rubber bands or hair ties around her wrist with her chosen names, while Lexi’s Dad writes the initials on his forearm as a reminder, and they are able to glance down at each mile marker in order to focus their prayer.

A few of the runners likened a marathon to life, and they expanded upon this metaphor by explaining that every mile of a race is different, with runners experiencing both highs and lows and a multitude of emotions. Lexi's Dad compared the two further when he said, "You start off, you're kind of on a high, you're young and energetic, and you feel good," and later in the race, as well as in life, one may have "self-doubt" and battle the fluctuation between a weakened spirit and reinvigorated energy. What's more, William's description of difficult periods in life resembled a marathon race: "[We've] all felt weak and not wanting to go on, not wanting to take that next breath." It is possible that the participants easily adapted prayer to their marathon running due to the similarities that the sport shares with life.

What was interesting was that the participants were adamant that the longer miles afforded this prayer space. Shorter amounts of miles, such as 5K (3.1 mile) races, were more "fitness." Lucy mentioned that she only uses her prayer miles in full marathons, as shorter races "for some reason . . . just didn't seem like as big of a . . . deal as a marathon." Beast described her initial shorter runs as "quick [bursts] of exercise" that she would hastily squeeze into her day, emphasizing again the necessary time that long distance running provides for the use of prayer and reflection. In fact, for some, it was not until they started increasing their endurance and running these longer distances that they began to incorporate prayer into their running in the first place and saw how the two could combine into a spiritual practice.

### **Prayer to Change One's Thoughts or Outlook**

All ten of the athletes mentioned using prayer in their running in order to adjust their mindsets. A handful of the runners use prayer to dissociate from the physical discomfort felt while running or racing. Paula, Esther, and Lucy all use prayer to reroute their mind from focusing on aspects of the run, such as swinging pony tails and blisters, to “something outside” and “bigger” than themselves. Doug finds that his communication with God while running makes him happy and thus encourages him to interact with others. In our interview, he recounted a notoriously mountainous race where he managed to detach from any physical pain and run through a section of the course he would normally walk due to his engagement with both God and fellow runner.

Similarly, prayer is employed in order to refresh or renew one's attitude during a run and to keep the sport in perspective. This ritual gives refocus to the activity, combats pessimistic thoughts, and reminds the participants of the reality of their situations. Esther uses prayer as mental guidance to avoid negative self-talk. She observed that her prayer gives her clarity and reminds her that she is loved, and she is no longer burdened by the outcome of her race. This feeling is then embodied when she picks her head up, corrects her posture, and carries on running. Kip described his prayer as humbling; he retrospectively assesses his training, which “puts [the outcome of the race] off of [God] and puts it back onto” himself. Through the use of prayer in running, “[you] begin to kind of see yourself . . . you understand your flaws, your weaknesses . . . but He still gives you the ability to go on a run.” Lexi's Dad also uses his prayer to refocus and modify his perspective when it comes to injury. He admitted to oftentimes becoming frustrated due

to physical setbacks which would prohibit him from running as he would have liked. However in one instance, by remembering his inspiration, specifically wounded veterans, he “realized that a calf injury’s really not that big of a deal,” and he was able to enjoy his race, regardless of his performance.

Throughout our interview, William recognized the ability of prayer and running to provide a restorative environment and to push away the worries of life: “To me, running is cleansing . . . It uproots all the hurt and the pain and the disappointment . . . and running is a therapy.” William discussed a spiritual song of forgiveness, healing, and peace which he reflects upon during his running as a prayer “of centering.” Several of the other marathoners also use prayer to mend their outlook regarding their lives outside of running. Beast echoed William’s sentiment, describing running as “much more therapeutic with prayer involved,” and she and others see running with prayer as a stress reliever. When discussing the refreshing aspect of running, Paula maintained that “being able to bring the focus away from me and into prayer just helps tremendously.” As a breast cancer survivor, she recalled her time during radiation treatment, and in order to alleviate some of her anxiety, she would escape on a run to pray. Through further developing their relationship with God or through being appreciative, the runners are able to shift their focus from life’s nagging, stressful thoughts to a much more pleasing interest.

Furthermore, Harvey uses running as a time of personal confession and to refocus his lifestyle with a hope to “do things differently and better” going forward; he is “hungry for that feeling [and] the spiritual benefit” of running, so he returns to the sport again and

again. Jerry commented that the combination of a good run and a good prayer sets the tone for the day, allowing him to feel more connected and “purposeful,” and Doug also believes “from a spirituality standpoint” that a morning run in which he feels that connection to God helps him to remain focused during the hours afterward. To these athletes, running with prayer provides noticeable mental benefits, both in and out of their sport.

### **Requests to Aid in Physical Performances**

In addition to regulating their own thoughts or current perspectives, the participants pray for other specific requests. About half of the marathoners disclosed prayers for aspects that may physically aid in their running. Many pray for strength, endurance, and to “keep putting one foot in front of the other.” When William was first starting to run, he prayed to be able to cover more distance each day. For Jerry and Kip, their prayers for physical ability have changed over the years. Both began their running admittedly asking for “unrealistic expectations” and desiring to hit specific time goals. Now, as Jerry said, “I’m not asking for any magic shoes that are going to make me faster than I’m able to be . . . it’s really just asking to let me bring out that potential that I know I have . . . to bring out the best in yourself.”

Beast admitted that strength-related prayers can transform throughout a competition to those more safety-related. She remembered a remarkably hot race where her “goal changed from a certain time finishing to do not check into a medical tent,” as dehydration was a serious concern, and she was praying “just to get . . . through it.”

Others also pray for safety, specifically for the awareness of motorists on the road and to avoid injury, and these prayers include those for themselves as well as for other runners.

A frequent request for “help” resounded throughout the interviews. Jerry provided detail about races where rabbis line the courses with Tefillin, Jewish items used in prayer, to pray with runners if they desire to stop. When asked what he thought about competitors stopping mid-race to pray, Jerry responded, “It made sense! . . . [You’re] doing your hardest and best, and somebody asks you if you want to say a prayer . . . I’ll take all the help I can get.” While some of the runners did not see God as a “micromanager,” or as one who would intervene with material gifts related to marathon running, these prayers for support and assistance were undoubtedly important to others.

### **Prayer for Appreciation and Thanks**

“I think that the whole situation [of being on a run] just brings me to a different level of appreciation.” Beast was not the only runner to mention appreciation. These thankful prayers are common throughout many of the participants’ running, and, in line with their uses of prayer for cognitive purposes, these prayers focus on both running- and non-running-related aspects.

Many of the participants are thankful for their ability to run, and they recognize the “gift” that they have received in the form of running. To this, Beast affirmed, “[My] physical ability is something that I am very happy with, very proud of . . . and I definitely feel like that’s God-given, so my relationship and my prayer definitely play a role in that.” The marathoners are especially grateful for their health; Paula, a nurse, works with those who do not share her physical capabilities, and she suggested that, at times, “people

take it for granted to be able to run and walk without pain.” Similarly, Kip noted, “Knowing that I can go . . . finish a marathon is just a huge gift . . . [My prayer is about] really understanding and grasping the grace that He’s given me to have a healthy body and a mindset to be able to do this.” The participants demonstrate their understanding of the fragility of their talent and the value they possess for running through their prayer.

The experience of running a marathon in general prompts appreciative prayers as well. From crossing the finish line and achieving a goal once considered unattainable, to expressing gratitude toward volunteers and spectators, the runners use their prayer to articulate their thanks. Lexi’s Dad’s marathoning has become “an outlet for appreciation” for him, and his and Lucy’s prayer miles during a race reveal this appreciative thought concerning significant and important others. Frequently running races with a large military presence, William and Lexi’s Dad also mentioned using their prayer to show gratitude for the United States, for the ability to live freely, and for those who sacrificed their lives for that freedom. Specifically, the final miles of a marathon elicit thankfulness when one is, as Kip put it, “digging at the bottom of the tank to draw up what you can.” Rather than question God, “Oh, why are you doing this to me?” when he is feeling the discomfort of the last stretch of the race, he instead concentrates on his appreciation of “getting to succeed in what [he loves].” Furthermore, with many possible factors affecting race day, including injuries, illnesses, or other unforeseen circumstances, the participants consider actually enjoying a race another reason for demonstrating their thanks through prayer. Beast reminisced about her Boston Qualifying race: “[My prayer]

was very thankful. I felt great the whole time. It was almost unreal how great I felt the whole race, so [my prayer] was very thankful, just appreciating every moment.”

As marathon running is a predominately outdoor sport, the runners are often surrounded by nature, another topic of their prayers of gratitude. Paula admires God’s “creativity” and the color “pallet He uses in nature,” and others offer prayers of thanks for the beauty of their running environment, including safe neighborhoods and pleasant race day temperatures. Thus, it is clear that through their running and their prayer, these athletes are able to show thanks for many facets of their lives.

### **The Effects of Prayer on Interactions with Others in a Running Setting**

Another theme that emerged throughout the interviews involved the effects of prayer and the influence they had with regards to interacting with others in a running setting. Many of the runners in the study implied in some way that their use of prayer or effects brought on by prayer flow over into these relationships.

Several of the participants are members of running groups or have running partners of the same religion, and they admitted that they enjoy running and conversing with individuals of similar beliefs and values. Beast mentioned, “[My running group prays] before our runs each time we go out, so I definitely feel like prayer brings us closer together . . . it makes that bond stronger between me and my group of running friends.” Esther also feels this cohesion after praying with her group, as prayer “allows [the group] to recognize who else is out there with us this morning [during the run].” She believes that fellow runners are able to understand each other, “bound in that mindset” of running, and the same applies for fellow Christians; therefore, “when it’s both of those

things together,” Esther said, “it puts you down into the nitty gritty of somebody’s life,” and prayer with another runner establishes valued community. Moreover, prayer use in Kip’s marathon running teaches him patience, which he then practices when running with others. For example, in a relay endurance event consisting of six male runners, this learned patience helped Kip remember to “give grace” to his teammates while competing.

Using running as his prayer, Harvey has admittedly become more accepting and less judgmental of those around him. The happiness he feels through the refreshing and cleansing act of running has allowed him to connect with friends and act as a support system and motivator to other runners. “Running activated [a] feeling of humanity” for him, and he has created a Facebook page, partly devoted to the promotion of running, where he displays others’ accomplishments and provides inspirational information. Regarding his running-related encouragement, Harvey stated, “I don’t want to promote it as only fitness. It’s more spiritual, more of the feeling that comes after the running.”

In the context of a marathon race, the participants also pray for others. As mentioned, they give their appreciation to volunteers, race officials, and spectators and also thank God for them. As Paula observed, “[The] well-run races? They don’t happen overnight. Those are lots and lots of planning and a lot of people behind the scenes that not everyone always thinks about.” Fellow runners in the race receive prayers as well, especially if they are noticeably struggling. To this, Lexi’s Dad said, “I think as you start getting into where people start fading out, or they went out too fast, and they start hurting, and they start to lick their wounds, I think you try to inspire them . . . and hopefully, you provide support back to them.”

Additionally during a race, the runners offer prayers for those who are not present. Lucy's prayer miles were instigated by the wish that while running, she would be "spending [her] time wisely and not selfishly . . . to make sure that those people knew that [she] was thinking of them." Likewise, Lexi's Dad's prayer miles are devoted toward remembering those who have inspired him.

Paula concluded our interview with two examples pertaining to the importance of endorsing healthy lifestyles. In the first, she mentioned how she is "proud" that her daughter, after learning from her, is modeling beneficial exercise behavior for her granddaughter. In her second example, Paula expressed frustration when others are "judgmental" toward those who are overweight and exercising: "They're the ones who are out there. They're the ones who are running. So encourage them." It appears as if Paula's understanding of her faith and her prayer life, having evolved from mildly egocentric "please give me" to more altruistic, promotes her desire to support others. The participants illustrated that while they use prayer in their own ways for personal mental and physical purposes, they also use prayer as thanks and to hopefully benefit others.

### **Differences in Races versus Training Runs**

Interestingly, the participants were generally split on their views regarding differences between marathon races and usual training runs. For those who perceive differences, they use prayer in distinctive ways as well. For example, William posited that training runs are for "dealing with issues" as a form of catharsis, while marathon races are for celebrations. As such, he prays prayers of healing and cleansing while out training by himself, whereas he demonstrates gratitude and thankfulness when racing. A

few of the participants also find the actual marathon a larger feat; Jerry noticed that his use of prayer becomes more “extensive” when he has an approaching race, and Lucy, due to her prayer mile commitments, is more “dedicated” to the marathon run. To these runners, racing is viewed as a commemorative finale in which the profits of months of training are able to be displayed and enjoyed.

However, the other participants in the study consider a marathon as “just another training run.” Although their prayers of appreciation are expanded to include thankfulness for volunteers and spectators, they do not perceive great differences in their use of the behavior in this competitive setting. In fact, Doug and his running partners have a clear “attitude” about training: “People ask what we’re training for. We say we’re training for life . . . to be better people, [and] we’re also training forever . . . so really, every race is [training].”

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to develop insight into the use and perceptions of the prayer of recreational marathon runners. Through semi-structured interviews with ten athletes, the five themes of long distance running as a space for the use of prayer, prayer to change one's thoughts or outlook, requests to aid in physical performances, prayer for appreciation and thanks, and the effects of prayer on interactions with others in a running setting were unearthed. Many of these findings are consistent with the literature involving prayer in sport, while other results parallel those reported in studies of leisure activities; as the participants in the study were recreational competitors, it is fitting that the results demonstrate this duality.

The marathoners use prayer to show appreciation for their "gift," their ability to run, and for their health, echoing prayers of other team athletes (Czech et al., 2004; Murray et al., 2005). Both recreational marathoners and athletes who are part of a team recognize their talents and are thankful for being able to experience their sport of choice. Czech et al. (2004) describe an athlete who perceives his ability to take part in sport as an opportunity afforded to him by God. He then uses his talents during his sport as a "thank you performance" for his gift (p. 8). Likewise, the marathoners value their ability to complete a run of 26.2 miles, and through their prayer, they demonstrate their gratitude

for this performance, acknowledging God as the provider of their endurance, physical well-being, and “great feelings” during the run.

Heintzman (2008) defines “leisure-spiritual coping” as “coping with stress through spirituality within the context of an individual’s leisure” (p. 58) and suggests that prayer incorporated into leisure activities may provide individuals with a way to manage hardships. Indeed, many of the runners mentioned using prayer while running as a way to reset, refresh, or renew themselves after dealing with stress in their everyday lives. Regarding their running specifically, these athletes use prayer to dissociate from physical discomfort, to keep their sport in perspective, and to maintain a positive outlook, which is similar to other research and anecdotal information. Czech et al. (2004) and Mosley et al. (2015) found that athletes pray to feel more relaxed and reduce tension, and multiple other studies have identified prayer as a coping mechanism in athletics (e.g., Czech & Bullet, 2007; Gould et al., 1993; Park, 2000). Buman et al. (2008) also reference a marathoner’s use of prayer as a dissociation technique, and Coakley (2015) suggests that “some athletes feel that religious beliefs enable them to transcend sports and bring balance back to their lives” (p. 529). This last sentiment was emphasized by two of the runners’ claims in the current study that their use of prayer grounded them and enabled them to reframe their negative views of injury and poor race performances.

The participants also use prayer to request assistance in their physical as well as their mental performances. Research has shown that team athletes pray for the safety of themselves and their teammates (Czech et al., 2004; Czech & Bullet, 2007; Mosley et al., 2015; Murray et al., 2005), just as the runners of this study prayed for their safety and the

safety of fellow runners. Additionally, team athletes and recreational runners alike pray for the ability to perform up to their potential rather than for a desired outcome or an unexpected, incredible accomplishment (Czech et al., 2004; Czech & Bullet, 2007). To this, the runners noted that they prayed not for specific finishing times, but rather for help in completing a run and to run to the best of their ability. This finding is consistent with Czech and colleagues' (2004) suggestion that team athletes pray to give their best effort in an athletic event and feel as if praying for a victory in the form of winning is selfish.

Prayer use seemed to impact the runners' relationships, as they implied that through their use of prayer in their running, they were better able to interact with others. This interaction ranged from being more accepting of all individuals to displaying grace, patience, and encouragement toward others to bonding with running friends. Regarding the latter, it has been suggested that prayer promotes team cohesion (Coakley, 2015; Murray et al., 2005); although not part of a team, a few of these marathoners were part of running groups, and they experienced this unity after praying together. Several explanations exist for how prayer could influence the runners' relationships with others. First, a common known teaching in many religions is that of loving one another. It is possible, then, that using prayer while running reminds the marathoners of this philosophy, and they are able to easily communicate that love to the individuals in their immediate running setting. Secondly, Byrne (1961) found that individuals are more attracted to others with similar attitudes and beliefs and also find them to be more intelligent and moral, setting the scene for much research on attraction. Many of the runners admitted to running with those of similar faiths, and this shared religious

characteristic may subconsciously influence their interactions, making them more prone to positive contact. Along these same lines, it is just as likely that the shared joy of running promotes these encouraging relationships, as the individuals are engaging in a common hobby and therefore can identify with each other. Lastly, physical activity is known to have effects on affect which may include increases in pleasure (see Ekkekakis, Parfitt, & Petruzzello, 2011); therefore, although it was interpreted that prayer while running created this positive outlook toward others, these relationships may have been affected by the runners' affect, which in turn may have actually been influenced solely by the exercise.

Long distance running was seen as an intentional space set aside for the use of prayer. Schmidt and Little (2007) have previously identified leisure time as a space for spirituality, with certain factors presented within this time, such as nature, challenges, and the ritual-like character of some leisure activities, influencing individual responses. For example, the awe-inspiring aspect of nature has been found to bring about a sense of connection with or awareness of God, comparable to some of the marathoners' comments that running in nature motivates a relationship and conversation with a higher being. Additionally, a challenge during leisure time, such as a demanding or risky physical task, may prompt reflection and a calling on God. To this, a few of the marathoners in the present study rely on God during times of struggle and doubt while running. Consistent with Schmidt and Little's notion that the planned, ritualistic characteristic of leisure activities can provide an opportunity for spirituality, many of the current participants

seemed to acknowledge that prayer and running were compatible as they were both behaviors the individuals commonly perform and could combine.

Furthermore, the runners indicated that the longer distances were those which provided this space rather than shorter distances. According to Schmidt and Little (2007), “leisure can be a spiritual catalyst or suppressant as people either open to an experience or avoid one through busyness” (p. 225). Thus, perhaps during shorter, self-described “fitness” runs, the marathoners are too engaged and “busy” to concentrate in a more spiritual way. Shorter runs may not provide the distance and thus the time necessary to devote to prayer or to feel therapeutic, and as the participants discussed shorter runs as quick additions to their day to supply a bout of exercise, their minds may be directed elsewhere.

A notable difference in prayer use between long distance runners and team athletes that involves the notion of this intentional space is that of engaging in “prayer miles.” The length of the marathon provides the twenty-six “slots” for prayer, and therefore, this type of prayer is unique to marathon runners, although it could be modified for other events sectioned by miles, as this segmenting is the only criteria. These prayer miles allow the participants to simultaneously show their appreciation for others while also dissociating from the physical aspect of the race. It is possible that the use of prayer miles is then a strategic skill employed specifically in a marathon race to detach from discomfort, to allow the runners to experience more positive emotions, and to aid in their race performance.

## **Implications and Future Directions**

The results of the study suggest that the incorporation of prayer into marathon running may provide mental health benefits for the spiritual athlete. The participants spoke of feeling better and more refreshed after a long run, some use running as a time to dissect and handle adversity in life, and others implied that an early run with a connection to a higher power could lead to a more productive and successful day. Watson and Nesti (2005) argue for several future sport and spirituality research directions that may contribute to the sport psychology literature; two of these directions include how spirituality can optimize both performance and personal excellence and also how spirituality can be combined into mental skills training. The present study supports both of these directions. As mentioned, the runners noted several mental benefits they perceive from using prayer in sport and indicated that this behavior reduces cognitive burdens and allows them to refocus on their running activities. Thus, prayer could be viewed as a skill used to train the mind for performance. Similarly, the participants of the study recounted praying for the ability to run at the level of their own potential. Prayer used in this way may then be seen as a method to meet personal standards of excellence if the individual praying attributes the success of the performance to the prayer. These implications also support the inclusion of prayer in sport psychology settings for the spiritual athlete, as recommended throughout the literature (Balague, 1999; Mosely et al., 2015; Watson & Czech, 2005). It is possible that elite runners may benefit from these spiritually founded practices as well.

Future research should investigate this behavior in athletes of other endurance events, specifically Ironman events. Several of the runners in this study also take part in these events, and one participant even noted that he perceived the act of completing an Ironman as a “more spiritual” event than that of completing a marathon. Although the concept of an athletic endeavor being more or less spiritual would be difficult to measure, an investigation into this competition may shed further light on the uses of prayer. An Ironman consists of a 2.4 mile swim, a 112 mile bike ride, and a 26.2 mile run; exploring the prayer of athletes during these three components may provide insight regarding the changing of prayer with either perceived difficulty, activity type, or both. Additionally, future research should also investigate the differences between prayer while training for a marathon and prayer while racing a marathon. Although several participants did not perceive a difference in their prayer between the competitive and the preparatory environments, others alluded to possible dissimilarities. Jerry’s comment that his pre-race prayer becomes more “extensive” supports Czech and Bullet’s (2007) finding that prayer intensity and frequency increases with the importance of the performance. Other studies could examine these contrasting views as well as the psychosocial characteristics that may exist in individuals who distinguish between racing and training and those who do not. This line of research may allow for further understanding as to when prayer is best used for a particular runner to perceive potential benefits.

Esther’s words provoke another suggested avenue of research: “Do I think that every prayer is answered? No, but I do think it’s still important to ask.” An investigation of recreational marathoners’ perceptions of the effectiveness of prayer, similar to Bleak

and Frederick's (1998) study, may provide further information to understand why these runners pray. The importance of this exploration relates back to Watson and Nesti's (2005) proposition to understand how spirituality can impact personal or performance excellence. If an individual runner believes prayer to be effective and ascribes his or her success to prayer, this attribution process may have profound motivational implications.

Finally, while prayer may be a potential supplementary mental technique used during performance, the use of prayer may also be an avenue to physical activity itself. Although conjectural, one who engages in prayer may wish to try running and praying based on the participants' suggestions that combining the two is "therapeutic" and "cleansing." Coupling running with prayer may provide one with a refreshing and new spiritual environment while simultaneously encouraging the adoption of a healthy lifestyle.

## **Conclusion**

The findings of this investigation regarding marathoners' uses of prayer support the results of other studies on the prayer use of team athletes and the spiritual aspect of leisure time. Recreational marathoners see long distance running as an intentional space for the use of their prayer, and they are able to use prayer while running to cope with stressful events in their lives, emphasizing the spiritual potential of free time activities previously identified (Heintzman, 2008; Schmidt & Little, 2007). Like other athletes, these runners use prayer to show their thanks, they pray for physical assistance, and they use this behavior to adjust their mindsets when it comes to performance. Finally, the use of prayer while running can influence relationships with others in a running setting. This

study sets the stage for future research to explore prayer in sport, including its possible benefits.

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