To all who helped refine my skills and motivated me throughout this thesis process, including Dr. Sagas, Dr. Connaughton, Dr. Ko, and doctoral candidate Michael Odio; and to the participants who opened up their lives to me, without whom this finished product would not have been possible; to my caring and supportive parents; and finally, to God who blessed me with the ability to achieve this work and instilled in me the desire to study religion and sport.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I thank the chair and members of my thesis committee for their mentoring, the participants in my study for their open and honest responses, and Julie McGrath for keeping me organized and informed of upcoming deadlines. I also thank my parents for their loving support and encouragement, as well as for their emphasis on education and faith in Jesus Christ. Finally, and most importantly, I thank my God for His overwhelming love and for the ability He has given me to complete this project.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Problem</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Significance of the Study</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Research Questions</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>REVIEW OF LITERATURE</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Definition of Religious vs. Spiritual</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Domains of Religion</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Religion in the Workplace</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Religion in Higher Education</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Religion and Intercollegiate Sports</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Present Study</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conceptual Framework</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>METHODOLOGY</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Methodological Approach</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Role of the Researcher</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Research Paradigm</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sample</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Data Collection</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Data Analysis</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>RESULTS AND DISCUSSION</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Research Question 1: Perceptions of Religious Well-Being</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Research Question 2: Expectations of Management</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Research Question 3 and 4: Athletics, Social Setting, and Academics</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Limitations</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B-1</td>
<td>Demographic information ................................................................. 71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C-1</td>
<td>Themes ........................................................................................................ 72</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2-1</td>
<td>Conceptual Model</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
RELIGION AND COLLEGE ATHLETICS: PERCEPTIONS OF FORMER STUDENT-ATHLETES ON THEIR RELIGIOUS WELL-BEING

By

Matthew W. Seitz

August 2012

Chair: Michael Sagas
Major: Sport Management

Research has examined the role of religious well-being in workplace outcomes and in higher education. However, no study has previously investigated the perceptions of student-athletes on their avenues for religious growth and well-being during their careers in intercollegiate athletics and how their religious well-being influenced athletic, academic, and social outcomes. This sample includes seven Christian, former student-athletes from a major, Division-I athletic program in the South. Participants were interviewed and themes were identified. Results suggest that participants’ religious well-being was closely connected to athletic, academic, and social outcomes. Participants had no expectations for athletic departments with regard to their religious well-being, but the administration still indirectly created a positive culture towards the expression of religion. Future research should look at workplace religiosity and how studies in this area relate to religious well-being and outcomes in college sport. Legal implications associated with religion in public institutions are discussed and warrant further research.
Problem

In 2007, the Pew Forum’s U.S. Religious Landscape Survey polled 35,000 Americans about their spiritual preferences and how important religion is in their lives. The results reveal that 92% of Americans believe in God or a universal spirit, and more than half of Americans surveyed pray at least once a day (Pew Forum, 2007). With the increased interest in religion and spirituality in America during this decade, practitioners and academicians in the business setting have discovered the need to examine religion and spirituality as it relates to the workplace. Numerous studies have been performed that relate to this aspect of work. For example, Cash and Gray (2000) have proposed a theoretical framework for accommodating religion and spirituality in the workplace. Ashmos and Duchon (2000) revealed a conceptualization and measure for spirituality at work. Milliman, Czaplewski, and Ferguson (2003) authored an exploratory empirical assessment on workplace spirituality and employee work attitudes. Finally, Robert, Young, and Kelly (2006) studied the relationship between spiritual well-being and job satisfaction.

In addition, religion and its place in higher education has been a recent area of research that continues to grow. In 2003, the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) began a multi-year research project on the spirituality of college students. The report, titled “The Spiritual Life of College Students: A National Study of College Students’ Search for Meaning and Purpose,” summarizes findings from a survey of 112,232 first-year students at 236 colleges and universities across America.

The increase of literature regarding religion in the workplace and the comprehensive study by the HERI revealing various outcomes of spirituality in the lives of college students led
to the current examination of religion in the field of college athletics. A search of the literature uncovered a limited amount of research in this area. Stevenson (1997) examined Christian athletes in the culture of elite sport and the dilemmas that these athletes may face. Dillon and Tait (2000) looked at the relationship between spirituality and being “In the Zone” in team sports. Storch, Kolsky, Silvestri, and Storch (2001) explored the religiosity of elite college athletes. Finally, Schroeder and Scribner (2006) studied the role of religion in the athletic department of a Christian college.

**Significance of the Study**

While previous research in the field of religion and intercollegiate athletics does relate to the purposes of this study, research has yet to take an in-depth look at how college athletes perceive their opportunities or lack thereof for religious well-being at public, secular institutions of higher learning. This research does not seek to promote a specific religion or affirm that religion should be a part of every student-athlete’s journey on campus. However, if those student-athletes who practice religion make many decisions on and off the court, field, or pitch through this spiritual lens and view their faith as the most important element in their lives, then coaches, administrators and academicians could be missing a key portion of what drives them. The line that separates one’s work life from their place of worship is increasingly becoming imaginary. In addition, there may be a moral obligation for institutions of higher learning to provide for the spiritual or inner development of those religious students who view their faith as an essential element of their lives (Astin, 2004; Laurence, 1999). Finally, management should be concerned about the relationship between religious well-being and the potential outcomes for these student-athletes, because if there is a relationship between religiosity and performance, this phenomenon must be explored.
As noted above, various studies have specifically looked at the benefits of religion to college athletes (DeBerg, 2002; Dillon & Tait, 2000; Stevenson, 1997; Storch et al., 2001; Storch et al., 2004a; Storch, Roberti, Bravata, & Storch, 2004b; Storch, Storch, Welsh, & Okun, 2002). However, noticeably absent is any study that looks at the perceptions of student-athletes on how universities, coaches, administrators, and the social setting are positively, negatively, or not at all influencing their religious well-being. In addition, no previous study has explored the possibility of linking this well-being to specific outcomes in the athletic, academic, or social realms. This is a significant gap in the literature. While this may be due to the sensitivity or lack of knowledge on the subject, what is critical is that the perceptions of those student-athletes who consider themselves religious should not be ignored.

Therefore, it is of considerable importance that coaches, academicians, and administrators alike listen to and examine what student-athletes understand to be true about their religious experiences during their time in college. While not claiming to fully address all of the aforementioned issues, this research seeks to explore whether or not college athletic programs are allowing opportunities for the religious maturation and well-being of those student-athletes who desire this experience.

**Research Questions**

The following questions provide the foundation to meet the aims of this exploratory study: (1) What are the perceptions of religious student-athletes of their own religious well-being throughout their college careers? (2) What do religious student-athletes expect management (i.e., coaches and administrators) to do to foster this desired religious well-being? (3) Which athletic, academic, and social influences impacted their religious well-being? Finally, (4) what effect does
the fostering or hindering of religious well-being have on specific athletic, academic and social outcomes?
CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This review of the literature is split into three sections: studies on (1) religion in the workplace, (2) religion in higher education, and (3) religion in college athletics. The reason for searching the fields of workplace religiosity and religion in higher education is to see if knowledge that has been discovered in those fields can be applied to the questions at hand in the field of sport. This is because the literature in sport and religiosity lacks a high-impact study examining the perceptions of student-athletes with respect to their religious well-being in college, the influences on that well-being, and the outcomes associated with it. First, however, a brief discussion of the differences between the terms *religiosity* and *spirituality* is necessary.

**Definition of Religious vs. Spiritual**

The words *religious* and *spiritual* often take many different meanings depending on the source. Zinnbauer, Pargament, and Scott (1999) performed a study describing the view of psychologists who polarize religiosity and spirituality and then proposed what could be done to break down this polarization. They offer an alternative approach that does not pit religiosity against spirituality. Often times, the term religion carries negative connotations while spirituality is increasingly defined in a positive light. However, Zinnbauer et al. explain that there can be both good and bad in terms of spirituality as well as religiosity. Pargament (1997) defines spirituality as a search for the sacred. Using this definition, Zinnbauer et al. make clear that as such, spirituality is the “heart and soul of religion, and religion’s most central function” (p. 909). One of the primary functions of religion is to “encourage people to see the world in a sacred light” and as “more and more objects of significance are made sacred, the distinction between religion and spirituality fades” (Zinnbauer et al., 1999, p. 911). Thus, within the context of this paper, the term *religious* will be used to encompass the word *spiritual*, unless during the
discussion of past literature the study being examined specifically uses *spiritual* instead of *religious*. The term *religious well-being* is adapted from Bufford, Paloutzian, and Ellison’s (1991) definition of *spiritual well-being* and will be used to mean people’s perception of the quality of their religious life.

**Domains of Religion**

Koenig, Parkerson, and Meador (1997) propose the three major accepted domains of religion: organizational, nonorganizational, and intrinsic religiosity. Organizational religiosity refers to how often one attends a formal religious worship service. Nonorganizational religiosity deals with the amount of time spent in private religious practice, such as the reading of Scripture and prayer or meditation. Finally, intrinsic religiosity speaks to how one integrates faith into every aspect of life.

**Religion in the Workplace**

There are four main studies related to workplace religiosity that provide much of the background for what this research will examine. They revolve around what workplace managers can do to ensure the religious well-being of their employees and what job outcomes result when managers demonstrate the proper care for this aspect of their employees’ lives.

One of the key job outcomes associated with spiritual well-being is job satisfaction (Robert, Young, & Kelly, 2006). Robert et al. discuss existing models of wellness that describe spiritual well-being as essential to overall wellness and explain how the work domain is a significant part of overall well-being (Chandler, Holden, & Kolander, 1992; Hattie, Myers, & Sweeney, 2004; Myers, Sweeney, & Whitmer, 2000). The Robert et al. study defines *spiritual well-being* as people’s perception of the quality of their spiritual life (Bufford, Paloutzian, & Ellison, 1991). This includes a horizontal component, referring to one’s purpose or meaning in
life and a vertical component, referring to a sense of one’s relationship with God (Robert et al., 2006). Prior to the work done by Robert et al., significant research had been done suggesting that those who have a positive sense of spirituality are less likely to be vulnerable to the symptoms related to mental illness and loss of workplace productivity (Ellison, 1983; Tsuang, Williams, Simpson, & Lyons, 2002; Westgate, 1996).

Robert et al. (2006) pull from previous research suggesting the boundaries between work and private life are blurring and the compartmentalization of religion is no longer as prevalent in American society. This means that people do not turn their religious sensors on and off. When they come to work, they do not forget who they are as religious people, but many integrate their faith into every aspect of their lives. After highlighting the importance of spiritual well-being to many employees, the study defines job satisfaction from an article by Dawis and Lofquist (1984). They propose that overall job satisfaction can be described as people’s overall positive attitude toward work and the degree to which their current position meets their needs, values, and expectations (Dawis & Lofquist, 1984).

Previous literature has recognized how important job satisfaction can be in increasing the productivity of employees as well as retaining workers (Cropanzano & Wright, 2001). With the limited research that has been performed in the field, there are indicators that religiosity can be a significant component of individuals’ overall wellness and work life (Bloch & Richmond, 1997; Mitroff & Denton, 1999; Savickas, 1997). Robert et al. (2006) searched for a relationship between spiritual well-being and job satisfaction and whether or not overall spiritual well-being could predict one’s level of general job satisfaction. The research found that all three variables being tested—overall spiritual well-being, religious well-being, and existential well-being—had a positive significant relationship with job satisfaction (Robert, Young, & Kelly, 2006). This
work on religion and job satisfaction is crucial to understand if similar studies are to be done in the realm of intercollegiate athletics. College athletes can potentially be viewed as employees of a university, so for an athletic department, ensuring the job satisfaction of student-athletes would be of considerable importance.

While the study by Robert et al. (2006) is significant for linking job satisfaction and religiosity, Milliman, Czapelewski, and Ferguson (2003) proceeded to link religiosity to other important employee job outcomes. This research was conducted to provide empirical evidence for a positive association between spirituality at work and various employee outcomes of interest to management. Like Robert et al., Milliman et al. explain how academia has acknowledged that spirituality involves a sense of wholeness, connectedness at work, and deeper values (Gibbons, 2000). Within the context of work, spirituality involves employees seeking connectedness to other employees, finding meaning and purpose in one’s daily job, and having a career in which one can express their values or at least ensure their values are aligned with those of management (Mitroff & Denton, 1999). Milliman et al. highlight the impact on employee attitudes when management supports the needs of its employees at work on a spiritual level (King & Nicol, 1999).

Milliman et al. (2003) chose to focus on three core dimensions of workplace spirituality. These three dimensions are (1) purpose in one’s work (individual level), (2) having a sense of community (group level), and being in (3) alignment with the organization’s values and mission (organizational level). One key note made by Milliman et al. is also true in this study: there is no intention to claim that looking at the relationship between religiosity and employee job attitudes indicates that the single most important aspect of religiosity is how it relates to successful job outcomes, employee work attitudes, and organizational effectiveness (Milliman et al., 2003).
Milliman et al. (2003) examined how these three core dimensions of workplace spirituality relate to five specific organizational behavior variables: organization commitment, intention to quit, intrinsic work satisfaction, job involvement, and organization-based self esteem (OBSE). The definitions of the organizational variables are as follows:

- **Organization commitment**: a condition in which an individual experiences a bond with their organization and wishes to maintain membership in the organization (Mowday, Steers, and Porter, 1979). Much like the intention to quit variable, organization commitment is closely related to reduced turnover in an organization.

- **Intention to quit**: concerned with how an individual is “considering leaving their current organization and investigating alternative employment prospects” (Milliman et al., 2003, p. 431).

These first two variables logically flow from Trott’s (1996) proposal that spiritual well-being is negatively related to absenteeism and turnover. If future research can establish a correlation with athletic outcomes, this could have major implications for athletic departments. Previous research indicates that organizations who establish an environment where the firm identifies with and is responsive to the needs and values of its employees will have members who (a) are more adaptable and will help the company succeed (Catlette & Hadden, 1998), (b) have a greater sense of *esprit de corps* (Channon, 1992), and (c) are more strongly committed to helping the organization succeed (Catlette & Hadden, 1998; Hawley, 1993). All three of these benefits would be significant for athletic coaches and administrators, desiring athletes who want the organization to succeed and have a commitment to bring about this success.
• **Intrinsic Job Satisfaction**: involves an individual’s attitudes toward elements related to work such as achievement, responsibility, advancement and growth (Herzberg, Mausner, & Snyderman, 1959).

• **Job involvement**: concerns the degree to which an individual identifies with and actively participates in his or her job and considers his or her performance to be important to their self-esteem (Blau, 1986).

Intrinsic job satisfaction and job involvement may also prove to be beneficial to those who are involved in the business of sport. In a competitive sporting landscape, athletes are oriented towards achievement and advancement, as well as striving towards their development to be the best player in their respective sports. In addition, coaches and administrators encourage active participation or job involvement for all their players. Active participation is integral for the high quality performance of intercollegiate teams.

• **Organization-based self-esteem (OBSE)**: refers to the extent to which employees think they satisfy their own needs and have a feeling of personal adequacy in their organizations. Employees who have a high level of OBSE are satisfied with their organizational role and see themselves as important, meaningful, respected, and worthwhile within their organization. OBSE has been found to be positively related to job performance, organizational satisfaction, citizenship behavior, and organizational commitment (Pierce, Gardner, Cummings, & Dunham, 1989).

OBSE should be included in the mix of variables that may potentially be significant for college athletics. The “job performance” identified by Pierce et al. is highlighted because in today’s intercollegiate sport world, performance and winning are of paramount importance. The
Milliman et al. (2003) analysis of results and findings supports the relationships between the three spirituality dimensions and the five organizational variables.

Ashmos and Duchon (2000) performed the third major study examined during the review of the literature. The authors offer a conceptualization and definition of workplace spirituality and present empirical support for its measure. They define spirituality at work as the “recognition that employees have an inner life that nourishes and is nourished by meaningful work that takes place in the context of community” (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000, p. 137). There are three apparent components included in this definition: the inner life, meaningful work, and community. The article intends to understand how the “recognition of inner life, meaningful work, and community in the workplace contribute to organizational performance” (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000, p. 137). Unlike the previous two studies outlined, this research deals less with identifying the outcomes of workplace spirituality as it does with detailing what kind of workplace environment would be a place where spirituality is fostered. Ashmos and Duchon propose that a workplace which creates a trusting atmosphere, where employees experience personal growth as part of a community, and where they feel valued and supported would be a workplace where spirituality can thrive.

Ashmos and Duchon (2000) sought to develop an instrument that would allow researchers to observe and measure the construct of workplace spirituality. The authors generated a list of questionnaire items addressing this construct at an individual level, work unit level, and organizational level. Factor 1 at the individual level, Conditions for Community, classifies a community as a “place in which people can experience personal growth, be valued for themselves as individuals, and have a sense of working together” (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000, pp. 139-141). Also in the individual level, Factor 2 or Meaning at Work includes items that refer
to what is energizing or joyful about work. Factor 3 at the individual level is Inner Life, referring to an individual’s hopefulness, awareness of personal values, and concern for spirituality.

Factors were also analyzed at the work unit level and the organizational level. Factor 1 at the work unit level describes elements focusing on the extent to which the “work unit is encouraging and caring” (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000, p. 142). Factor 2 discusses the extent to which “informants identify with the work unit’s values, goals, and mission” (p. 142). If management is seeking to create the type of work environment that has been described, they should strive to achieve these two factors because they embody the notions of community and meaningful work (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000). Finally, different factors were identified at the organizational level as well. Factor 1 at the organizational level looked at how the subjects perceive the values of their organization. Building on Factor 1, Factor 2 deals with how informants relate to the values of their organization. Four other factors not initially discussed were revealed after the data analysis. One of those factors, Blocks to Spirituality, is defined as “conditions that would inhibit the development of spirituality in the workplace” (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000, p. 141). Overall, Ashmos and Duchon believe that the data support the idea that spirituality in the workplace involves these three dimensions: inner life, meaningful work, and community. However, as the questionnaire items moved from the individual to the organizational level, it was more difficult to assess workplace spirituality (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000).

Finally, Cash and Gray (2000) offer a framework on how to legally accommodate an employee’s spiritual or religious beliefs at the workplace. Employees are searching for greater meaning and purpose in their work, and religious accommodation has become one major source for achieving that meaning and support (Cash & Gray, 2000). They offer interesting statistics highlighting how corporate chaplains, numbering in the thousands, continue to be a booming
industry in addition to workplace counseling. At the turn of the century, there were more than 1,500 religious organizations in the United States, and while 90 percent were Christian, the number of Islamic, Buddhist, and Hindu Americans are rapidly growing (Cash & Gray, 2000; Pew Forum, 2007). The majority of these faiths teach their members how to live outside of their places of worship, once again showing that the line separating one’s work life from their place of worship may be imaginary. In addition, Cash and Gray explain that human resource professionals are reporting more and more cases concerning employees’ problems with how their religious life and work life interact.

With regard to practical application and accommodation, the authors propose various pieces of advice that management should put into practice. First, they call management to remember that for their religious employees, it is probably impossible to ask them to separate their work life from their religious beliefs (Cash & Gray, 2000). In fact, this may have the effect of decreasing one’s satisfaction with their job and work motivation. However, a company is not required to offer accommodation that will ultimately disrupt and decrease efficiency and productivity. Organizations must seek ways to accommodate religious needs “within the context of their work processes and production needs” (Cash & Gray, 2000, p. 128). Management must sincerely examine the manifestation requests of their employees’ religious observances and practices, and if those reasonable requests do not stand in opposition to the company’s productivity, then they should be granted. These manifestation requests involve an individual’s desire to express their religious experience at work and may vary from wearing religious jewelry or dress to discussing their religious faith openly at work. One example is if employees want to pray at their desk or take time during lunch to pray, while other employees are not required to do so, management should honor this manifestation (Cash & Gray, 2000).
Religion in Higher Education

While many articles on religion and higher education were reviewed, one exhaustive study by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at UCLA is examined here. This study, funded by the Templeton Foundation, is titled “The Spiritual Life of College Students: A National Study of College Students’ Search for Meaning and Purpose” and the co-principal investigators are Alexander and Helen Astin. The title implies the main purpose of the research: to examine how college students conceive of spirituality, the role it plays in their lives, and how universities can be more effective in facilitating students’ spiritual development. In providing the foundation for this research, the Astins wrote, “We have increasingly come to neglect the students’ inner development—their sphere of values and beliefs, emotional maturity, spirituality, and self-understanding” (Astin & Astin, 2003, preface).

In 2003, the HERI performed a study of 112,234 entering first-year students who attended 236 different colleges and universities across the United States. The authors acknowledge that colleges and universities play a broad formative role in society, making higher education a critical focal point for answering the question of how to balance the exterior and interior aspects of life (Astin & Astin, 2003). College coaches are often fired for their failure to win games on a consistent basis. If coaches feel a constant pressure to win above anything else, the development of the internal lives of student-athletes will most likely be ignored. Many universities appear to be content with maintaining the external focus.

The HERI reveals that college students in America today have very high levels of spiritual interest and involvement, and many are actively pursuing the meaning and purpose of life. Moreover, they are engaged and involved in religion, showing considerable commitment to their religious beliefs and practices. The research shows that freshmen have very high
expectations for the role their institutions will play in their emotional and spiritual
development—not just their external development (academic, social, career, or athletic). The
HERI study reveals that freshmen assign a high value to their universities enhancing their self-
understanding, supporting their development of personal values, and creating an environment
that encourages the expression of spirituality (Astin & Astin, 2003).

Astin and Astin (2003) found that while religiosity is directly related to physical well-
being, its relationship with psychological health is more complicated. Highly spiritual students
are slightly less likely to exhibit positive psychological or mental health when compared to less
spiritual students. However, highly spiritual students are much more likely than their less
spiritual classmates to possess the trait of equanimity, being able to find meaning and purpose
even in the midst of difficult and trying circumstances. Also, during these times highly spiritual
students have a greater ability to find peace or to be centered in the midst of chaos in their lives.
Therefore, while spirituality and psychological distress are positively correlated, spirituality and
mechanisms for coping with hardship are also positively correlated.

With regard to physical well-being, religiosity is positively associated with various
measures of this trait. More specifically, highly religious students are more likely than their less
spiritual peers to eat a healthy diet and to report “above average” physical health, while they are
less likely to participate in the consumption of alcohol and cigarettes. In contrast to these
students, those who are experiencing an unsettled feeling about religious matters, known as
religious struggle, are much more likely to drink, smoke cigarettes, stay up all night, miss school
due to sickness, and less likely to rate their health as “above average” (Astin & Astin, 2003).

A number of other studies pertaining to religion and higher education are available,
investigating how to accommodate religion at institutions of higher learning and the role of
spirituality in colleges and universities (Astin, 2004; Laurence, 1999; Sherkat, 2007; Zajonc, 2003). Universities should consult these articles and discover how to legally implement programs and create environments that encourage religious development.

**Religion and Intercollegiate Sport**

A number of studies already examine the relationship between religion and sport to some degree. Further, some authors have looked at the significance of religion in college athletics specifically. A review of the literature reveals studies comparing the religious faith of college students who are not athletes vs. intercollegiate athletes (Storch et al., 2004b), psychological adjustment and the strength of religious faith in intercollegiate athletes (Storch et al., 2004a), and the process of how chaplains are provided for athletic departments and teams (Waller, Dzikus, & Hardin, 2008). These are just a few examples from the wide range of studies conducted on the importance of faith and religion in the lives of student-athletes. However, three main sources were consulted to frame the present study.

In 1997, Stevenson published a paper on the dilemmas and solutions of Christian athletes in the culture of elite intercollegiate athletics. He wanted to “explore some of the difficulties these [Christian] athletes encountered with the dominant culture of elite, competitive sport” and “examine the ways in which they used their Christian faith to cope with these difficulties” (Stevenson, 1997, p. 242). Stevenson conducted 31 in-depth interviews with 23 male and eight female student-athletes described as professing Christians and associated with the sports ministry Athletes-in-Action. He identified five distinct difficulties or dilemmas with being a Christian in intercollegiate athletics: (1) the importance of winning, (2) the importance of social status, (3) the relationship with the team and with the coach, (4) the relationship with opponents, and (5) the
expectations that others had of them as athletes in their surrounding social settings (Stevenson, 1997).

There are two general types of consequences student-athletes encounter when facing the five difficulties presented above: (1) the experience of crises and (2) a search for meaning. Nearly one-third (n = 12) of the athletes in the study reported they had experienced a crisis of some degree during their careers as a result of the culture of elite, intercollegiate athletics. In addition, an even greater number of athletes (n = 15) reported a desperate longing to find a meaning or purpose in what they were doing. The study also revealed three distinct ways in which Christian athletes react to confront the dilemmas discussed above: (1) an intensified commitment to the dominant culture of elite, competitive sport; (2) an accommodation (sometimes hesitant) to this culture; or (3) an eventual rejection of this culture.

These three different responses come from an earlier study by Stevenson (1991), identifying three types of Christian student-athletes: (1) the segregated type, (2) the selective type, and (3) the committed type. The segregated type is characterized by the nearly complete segregation of the two role-identities of student-athlete and Christian. The selective type allows the Christian role-identity in athletic situations, but gives preference to the athlete role-identity and limits the expression of the Christian role-identity. Finally, the committed type is characterized by a significant commitment to the Christian role-identity to the point where this role-identity is dominant in athletic and nonathletic social situations (Stevenson, 1991).

Stevenson approached the three types of Christian athletes from a developmental perspective, derived inductively in this case from the perceptions the athletes had of themselves as Christians. The foundation of the developmental perspective is the perception of the athletes on two critical issues: (a) the Christian imperative to completely integrate one’s faith, and (b) the
developmental nature of the Christian faith (Stevenson, 1991). First, inherent in the athletes’
Christian faith is the idea that the values of Christianity are to be integrated into every aspect of
the Christian’s life. However, when one becomes a Christian, one does not instantaneously grasp
a complete understanding of all the expectations and implications of one’s faith. Genuine
Christianity is an ongoing process of maturation and development (Stevenson, 1991). The
current study explores the development of participating student-athletes’ faith during their
careers as Christian student-athletes and what influenced their religious well-being.

In the 1997 study, Stevenson reports that while there are dilemmas student-athletes have
to face as Christians in this culture, these athletes report one major way to deal with the problems
is to either turn to Christianity or return to Christianity, and in particular, a type of evangelical
Christianity. With a newfound sense of faith in Christ, some of these athletes were able to
embrace the sport culture that previously had been a challenge for them, while others were at
least able to maintain their involvement in intercollegiate athletics by using their faith to cope
with the issues that were once significant dilemmas in their lives (Stevenson, 1997).

These findings are of considerable importance to the current study. The previously
outlined studies on religion in the workplace have linked religious well-being to various positive
results in the workplace. However, Stevenson specifically looks at the context of sport, showing
administrators and coaches how important religious well-being is for many college athletes. For
certain religious athletes, there is no separation between the athletic and spiritual realms. Their
faith is integrated into every choice they make both on and off the court. It would be imprudent
for coaches and administrators to ignore this very significant part of many student-athletes’ lives.

Another study on the importance of religion in the lives of student-athletes deals with the
potential link between religiosity and being “in the zone” in team sports. Dillon and Tait (2000)
defined religiosity or spirituality as “experiencing the presence of a power, a force, an energy, or a God close to you” (Dillon & Tait, 2000, p. 93). Building on this definition, athletes were asked to assess how often, if ever, they use this type of religious experience in any of the circumstances they encounter on the field, court, or pitch as a member of a team sport. The majority of the 62 participants were from a Division III college team. Since no instrument directly measuring this construct existed, an instrument known as the Spirituality in Sports Test (SIST) was used.

Participants also completed the Zone Test (ZT) to measure the experience of being “in the zone.” While the nature of the research is exploratory, the authors predicted a direct relationship between the scores on the SIST and the scores on the ZT due to similarities between being in the zone and spirituality.

The results support the hypothesis that there is a relationship between being more spiritual and being in the zone in sports. Due to the correlational nature of the study, the direction of the relationship cannot be determined. In other words, one cannot infer that spirituality causes the “in the zone” state or if being “in the zone” causes one to be more spiritual (Dillon & Tait, 2000). However, this does suggest the potential impact of channeling one’s religiosity onto the court and using that to one’s advantage. Moreover, in-depth interviews on this phenomenon need to occur with student-athletes for this research to increase in value.

Finally, in 2001, Storch et al. performed a pilot examination of the religiosity of student-athletes compared to college students not involved in intercollegiate athletics. In their introduction, Storch et al. discuss the four main ways in which religion and athletic performance interact. Among those four, as highlighted earlier, a student-athlete with a highly religious orientation has the inclination to pray for intervention from God and may have the strength to deal with the hardships and suffering that may come from being a Christian athlete in the elite,
secular world of sport (Gould, Udry, Bridges, & Beck, 1997; Koenig, 1994). Storch et al. reference existing studies which break religion down into three main components: organizational, nonorganizational, and intrinsic religiosity (Koenig, Parkerson, & Meador, 1997). The authors hypothesize that athletes would report a higher degree of all three types of religiosity as compared to nonathletes.

Storch et al. (2001) found that athletes reported a higher degree of organizational and intrinsic religiosity than nonathletes. They make the claim that understanding religion’s role in the lives of student-athletes is crucial for establishing a strong athlete-coach or athlete-consultant alliance. This is another important implication for management. When consulting student-athletes, it is necessary to understand how religious values impact their decision-making process and daily lives. In addition, utilizing the religiosity of individual student-athletes may help to open the lines of communication between the religious student-athlete and his or her coach.

Present Study

While many of these previous studies highlight the function and benefit of religion in the lives of student-athletes, they do not examine the perceptions of religious student-athletes with regard to their religious well-being during their time at Division I, intercollegiate programs. The literature either indirectly addresses the role of the athletic department and coaching staff in dealing with their athletes’ religiosity, or it is not discussed at all. An exploratory, qualitative study is needed to fill the existing gap by examining the role of coaches, athletic administrators, professors, teammates, classmates, and the social setting as influences on the religious well-being of Christian former student-athletes. In addition, the outcomes that potentially flow from religious well-being must be investigated. An in-depth review of the literature has provided the following four questions: (1) What are the perceptions of religious student-athletes of their own
religious well-being throughout their college careers? (2) What do religious student-athletes expect management (i.e., coaches and administrators) to do to foster this desired religious well-being? (3) Which athletic, academic, and social influences impacted their religious well-being? Finally, (4) what effect does the fostering or hindering of religious well-being have on specific athletic, academic and social outcomes?

**Conceptual Framework**

After reviewing the literature, a conceptual model was created for this study to build the framework described below. There are essentially two basic parts to the model (see Figure 2-1). The first section of the model examines the influence of athletic, academic, and social factors on the religious well-being of Christian student-athletes. Recall that *religious well-being* is defined as one’s perception of the quality of their religious life. Therefore, one of the main questions being posed is how do athletic, academic, and social influences play a role in the quality of religious life of Christian student-athletes?

Figure 2-1: Conceptual model
The second section of the model examines how religious well-being impacts athletics, academic performance, and social decisions of Christian student-athletes. How does the quality of religious life for student-athletes affect their athletic and academic performance and social decisions? This examines the issue of whether or not being religious has a positive or negative impact on these outcomes or no impact at all. It is significant to explore whether or not the literature on religion and the workplace, revealing the importance of religious well-being on job outcomes such as job satisfaction, motivation, commitment and job involvement, transfers to the world of intercollegiate athletics.

**Model: influences.**

**Athletic influences:** The specific athletic influences examined in this part of the model are (a) relationship with teammates, (b) relationship with coaches, (c) relationship with opponents, and (d) the importance of winning for intercollegiate athletic programs. These were all identified by Stevenson (1997) as dilemmas that Christian athletes face in the culture of elite sport. These factors could have a positive or negative impact on the quality of religious life for Christian student-athletes or no impact at all.

**Academic influences:** This factor refers to the impact of the academic and classroom experiences at secular institutions of higher learning, more specifically (a) professors, (b) classmates, and (c) tutors and mentors (Nye, 2005). It examines the existence of views in the classroom that could potentially clash with Christian student-athletes’ beliefs, and whether or not Christian student-athletes are compelled to stand up for their faith in classroom discussions. These experiences could potentially have the impact of strengthening or weakening religious well-being. It also examines the possibility that there are professors, classmates or tutors that share the student-athletes’ religious views and consequently support their religious well-being.
**Social influences:** This factor can be broken down into (a) the importance of social status for student-athletes and (b) the expectations that others have of them as athletes in their surrounding social settings, including parties, clubs and bars, and various hangout spots both on and off campus (Stevenson, 1997). This also includes (c) the role churches, parachurch organizations and chaplains play in the lives of Christian student-athletes during their time on campus (Nye, 2005; Waller, Dzikus, & Hardin, 2008).

These three influences and their interaction with the religious well-being of former student-athletes comprise the antecedent of the model. However, before interviewing participants on these influences, I began the interview process with a broad inquiry into the perception of participants on their overall religious well-being upon entering college and throughout college (the central construct in Figure 2-1). This provides a general characterization of the quality of their religious life while on campus. After the general inquiry and discussion of the three influences, the interview moves to the investigation of potential outcomes linked to religious well-being.

**Model: outcomes**

**Athletic outcomes:** A number of studies previously highlighted reveal the work outcomes that are associated with religious well-being. These outcomes include job satisfaction, increased productivity, organization commitment, lower intention to quit and job involvement (Milliman et al., 2003; Robert et al., 2006). In the literature on religion and higher education, religious students were found to exhibit greater physical well-being that their non-religious counterparts. They were less likely to drink, smoke, engage in risky sexual behavior and more likely to eat a healthy diet and have better sleeping habits. Results also showed religious students to be slightly more likely to experience psychological distress. However, they were more likely
to find meaning and purpose in the midst of difficult circumstances and more likely to be at peace and centered during chaotic circumstances (Astin & Astin, 2003). Finally, in the sport and religion literature, Stevenson (1997) found certain Christian athletes to respond to the dilemmas posed to them by intercollegiate athletics by either increasing their commitment to sport or completely abandoning the sport altogether. Dillon and Tait (2000) discovered a link between spirituality and being “in the zone” in team sports, and Storch et al. (2001) found religious athletes to be more prepared to face the adversity that comes from being a student-athlete.

**Academic outcome:** Religious well-being may also potentially play a role in the academic arena of Christian student-athletes. The Bible states in Colossians 3:17, “And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (English Standard Version). It also says in 1 Corinthians 10:31, “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.” Finally, in Colossians 3:23, the Bible commands Christians: “Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men.” These verses can also be used to help frame the *Athletic Outcomes* and *Social Outcomes* sections. It is interesting to investigate whether or not verses that call Christians to this high standard actually influence the day-to-day walk of Christian athletes in their classroom experiences with professors, classmates and the quality of their academic work. Moreover, it has been reported that regular attendance at religious services increases academic achievement and observance of one’s religious traditions increases the amount of hours students report spending on academic work and extracurricular activities (Mooney, 2010).

**Social outcomes:** As previously mentioned, churches and parachurch organizations play a crucial role in the lives of religious students in the general student population (Nye, 2005). It is conceivable that the religious well-being of Christian student-athletes impacts their decision of
whether or not to be involved with these organizations while on campus. Also, social decisions related to partying and attending clubs and bars are explored (Stevenson, 1997).
CHAPTER 3  
METHODOLOGY

Methodological Approach

Qualitative, exploratory research was utilized to discover the perceptions of participating Christian former student-athletes on their religious experiences while on campus. The purpose in using this type of research is to discover in-depth meaning and understanding of the phenomena being investigated. Qualitative researchers study elements in their natural settings, seeking to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them. Qualitative techniques look for answers that stress how social experience is created and given meaning. Qualitative researchers have a greater ability than quantitative researchers to confront and come up against the constraints of the everyday social world (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

More specifically, phenomenology was the qualitative approach employed in this study, as its advantages clearly relate to the questions being posed. This method has been used more and more frequently in social science research and can be utilized effectively in sport management research. Phenomenology has been described as a “reasoned inquiry which discovers the inherent essences of appearances” (Stewart & Mickunas, 1990, p. 3). Phenomenological research seeks to apprehend what is central to the phenomena being studied (Donalek, 2004), and affords participants the opportunity to communicate their experience without the meaning being significantly altered (Levesque-Lopman, 1988). The main intent of phenomenology is to uncover, explore, and describe the uncensored phenomena of the issues being discussed, as they are immediately presented (Spiegelberg, 1970). This approach centers on developing knowledge and understanding of men and women and their relationship to the world (Stewart & Mickunas, 1990). Phenomenology is advantageous for sport management research because it offers the capability to foster understanding of many of the complex and
perplexing conditions for sport managers. It is especially suitable for this study because of the desire to uncover the in-depth perceptions of former student-athletes.

**Role of the Researcher**

In qualitative research, the researcher acts as the human instrument of data collection and must maintain what Patton (1990) refers to as “empathic neutrality” (p. 55). A primary aim of the researcher is to achieve “theoretical sensitivity,” referring to the attribute of having insight, the ability to find meaning in the data, the aptitude of understanding, and the capability to make important distinctions between data that is pertinent and significant and that which is not (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

The researcher plays an important role within the context of phenomenological research. A primary way that the researcher gets to the essence of meaning is the use of a form of interpretation known as hermeneutics, described as one of the processes which people use in making sense of their everyday lives (Walters, 1994). This style of interpretation assumes that the interpreter has prior knowledge that affects their objectivity, and that it is only possible to interpret something according to one’s own lived experience (Walters, 1995). In phenomenology, the researcher’s bias is essential to consider since it is the researcher that seeks to comprehend the human condition as much as the lived experience of the phenomena itself, and attempts to uncover the meaning of the lived experience from the subjective perspectives of the persons who participate (Edwards & Skinner, 2009).

In this case, my personal bias must be taken into consideration. As a Christian, I entered the interview process with preconceptions about what it means to be a Christian on a secular campus of higher education. I was raised in a Christian home and have been a follower of Christ for more than fifteen years now, and I attended a secular university for my undergraduate
studies. However, I was not a student-athlete in college and only know what it is like to be a Christian student-athlete through interaction with them. Therefore, I have limited prior judgments about what it means to be a Christian student-athlete. This helped me approach the individual interviews without considerable presuppositions on the issue.

**Research Paradigm**

Further, I approached this study from an interpretivist paradigm, which sees reality as created by people assigning meaning (Edwards & Skinner, 2009). Interpretivists believe there are many truths and reality is constructed by each knower. According to this particular paradigm, individuals seek to understand the world in which they live and work. My goal was to uncover the perceptions of Christian student-athletes and to explore their worlds from their point of view, because according to this paradigm, reality is what they perceive it to be. In order for this goal to be accomplished, there must be interaction between the researcher and participants (Creswell, 2007).

**Sample**

I used purposive and convenience sampling, because participants were subjectively selected for the express purpose of the current research questions. Purposive sampling is utilized when unique cases must be examined to provide especially informative data and when aiming to identify particular cases for in-depth investigation, as is necessary for this study (Edwards & Skinner, 2009). The sample consists of seven Christian former student-athletes from a major, secular, Division-1 college in the South. Four participants are male and three are female, and they graduated from the university between 2007 and 2009.

The fact that they are former student-athletes is both an advantage and a disadvantage. The advantage is that they are removed from their time on campus and examined their college
experience as objective and reasonable observers compared with those who are currently in the situation. However, it is also a disadvantage because I am depending on the accuracy of their memories from several years ago. All of the participants were on team sports during their athletic careers with one exception, and they won six national championships between them. I informed these Christian former student-athletes about the nature of the study and asked for their involvement, and I obtained their verbal agreement to participate. All seven expressed that they are still practicing their Christian faith and were professing Christians during college.

**Data Collection**

Because of the need to have interaction between the researcher and participants, data was collected using in-depth individual interviews. Fontana and Frey (2005) define interviewing as a data-gathering tool involving interaction between two or more people in a question and answer format. In-depth interviews give the researcher an ability to get to the heart of the matter and to hear the voices of those they are trying to study. Face-to-face interviews allow researchers to access hidden voices and meaning (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). The open-ended format of my questions allowed participants to expand upon their experiences (Edwards & Skinner, 2009).

More specifically, I utilized semi-structured interviews. Favored widely by sport management researchers, semi-structured interviews operate under the assumption that respondents have particular experiences and knowledge they can elaborate upon. In these interviews, the situation has typically been analyzed beforehand, and the researcher wants to find out additional and in-depth information. This method of questioning allows for greater flexibility, social interaction, and exploration of ideas (Edwards & Skinner, 2009). The interviewer has the ability to guide and specify topics to be discussed, as well as freely probe and
ask follow-up questions. Semi-structured interviews focus on the respondent’s subjective experiences and allow them to describe the situation in detail (Edwards & Skinner, 2009).

The interviews took place in the spring of 2012 at various times when the participants were available, and I obtained informed consent from each former student-athlete. The IRB approved the research proposal and interview questions. Using the guide in A-1, participants were interviewed for approximately 60-90 minutes. The interview guide developed for this study was grounded in the literature and developed from the conceptual model presented in Figure 2-1, in addition to being vetted by faculty members on a panel and a current doctoral student. As previously outlined, the interview began with a general inquiry into the overall religious well-being of the former student-athletes as they entered the university, and what they expected for their religious faith as they progressed throughout college. Next, the interview examined athletic, social and academic influences on the religious well-being of the participants. Finally, I asked participants about the impact of their religious well-being on specific athletic, social and academic outcomes in their lives.

Data Analysis

After conducting and recording the interviews, I read each transcript from every participant in its entirety to gain a sense of understanding of the responses of individual participants. Creswell (1998) proposes that phenomenological data analysis happens through the reduction of information, analysis of relevant statements, identification of common themes, and a search for all of the possible meanings emerging from the data. To reduce the information, I broke each interview into identifiable, stand-alone pieces which were then categorized by similarity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Breaking down the interviews into individual pieces is known as coding, and I coded according to the stages of analysis as detailed by Strauss and
Corbin (1998). This entails transcribing each interview and microanalyzing the text. Microanalysis involves reading through and analyzing the interviews line by line to develop specific concepts and categories. Then, I used open coding or “breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 61).

During the open coding phase, I identified and tentatively named conceptual categories into which the observed phenomena were grouped. The point was to create descriptive categories to form a preliminary framework for analysis (Edwards & Skinner, 2009). I used quotes from the interviews to group data into similar categories across the different participants. Next, I re-examined the categories identified during open coding to determine how they were linked using axial coding. It is during this phase of coding that categories are compared and combined to paint the bigger picture. Axial coding allows the researcher to examine whether sufficient data exists to support the interpretation of their conceptual model (Edwards & Skinner, 2009). Following open and axial coding, I was more analytical, looking for patterns and explanations in the codes. Finally, I utilized selective coding, which involves reading through the raw data for cases that illustrate the analysis or help clarify the concepts (Edwards & Skinner, 2009).

I used peer debriefing to enhance the credibility and dependability of the categories and data resulting from the coding method. Peer debriefing is the procedure of having someone outside of the research process review the categories developed during coding to enhance the credibility of the findings. The peer debriefer both challenges and supports the researcher by asking them to explain their methodology and results (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).
Four research questions shaped the framework for the interview process, and a number of themes emerged within research questions 2, 3, and 4. In this section, I first address the findings of research question 1 with a discussion of participants’ perceptions of their overall religious well-being during college and how their religious well-being changed throughout their time on campus. The term religious well-being is defined as people’s perception of the quality of their religious life (Bufford, Paloutzian, and Ellison, 1991).

**Research Question 1: Perceptions of Religious Well-Being**

The first research question examined the perceptions of religious well-being among religious student-athletes throughout their respective collegiate careers. Interview responses revealed that the majority of participants encountered significant difficulties in maintaining the quality of their religious life during college. On the one hand, some indicated that their religious well-being thrived in the middle of trials and tribulations, while others expressed that it languished through these experiences. As Stevenson (1997) notes, in spite of the major dilemmas Christian athletes face on secular college campuses, there are ways to realize religious growth during college. In the present study, participants varied in their success in overcoming these challenges.

Four participants experienced religious growth during their time on campus. Bryce’s faith was stronger during college than any other era in his life. He explained,

A lot of people go to college and pretty much go one of two ways. They veer off the path of their walk with God or grow closer with God. I really feel like my college days were the best time of my life as far as my faith is concerned. I made mistakes and I did things I shouldn’t have, but overall, I definitely left college with a stronger faith.
Bryce identified two distinct paths Christian student-athletes can take in college. They can either stray from their metaphorical walk with God or draw closer to God. While acknowledging he made mistakes along the way, Bryce still successfully grew in his faith and chose to draw closer to God, leaving college with an overall improvement in his religious well-being. Similarly, Ryan and Kari’s experience at this public, secular university had a positive effect on their religious well-being. For example, Ryan stated that college “was a time in my life where I grew the most up to that point, and I became closer to God throughout those four years. My faith got stronger.” Kari added, “growth overall would be the way I would characterize it.” Thus, while Stevenson exposed dilemmas Christian athletes face on secular campuses, there is a way to navigate them to enhance one’s religious well-being.

However, for three participants, the ever-present temptations of college proved to have a negative impact on their religious well-being, causing them to veer from their walk with God. Damon remarked,

[My religious well-being] wavered a little bit. When you go to college, you are kind of on your own. I tried to attend church regularly, but it became very difficult. As a result of being away from home constantly with athletics and being another kid on a college campus with all of the temptations around, I think my faith wavered a little bit.

It is evident that the temptations of university life harmed Damon’s religious well-being. Leslie also found this new awareness of worldly temptations to have a negative impact. She acknowledged,

For me personally, with my faith, I feel like I came in at one level at a simple, innocent level of faith, and then as I grew and understood more about the world, my faith declined with that. When I got aware of the world, I got aware of all of these other things going on. Unfortunately, all of that time took away from my faith and time in church and with people.

Responses to this research question painted a picture of the challenges these former student-athletes faced, and disclosed specific difficulties that affected their religious well-being. All
participants indicated periods of struggle throughout their time on campus, but some were better at handling that struggle than others.

**Research Question 2: Expectations of Management**

All seven participants unanimously expressed they had no expectations regarding the athletic administration’s role in their religious well-being. Ryan stated, “I had no expectations and it really didn’t even enter my mind that the athletic department or university would do anything to provide a service to athletes or anything like that.” While Kari and Leah did not expect the university to support their religious well-being, the thought of services being provided by the athletic department never entered Ryan’s mind. Damon echoed Ryan’s sentiment, emphasizing,

> When you take visits to different colleges, one thing I can say is they never really talk too much about religion or opportunities for religious practice or Sunday schools, or anything associated with church. Usually, they don’t bring that up on your visits, so coming into college, I didn’t really expect my college to provide anything.

While some universities provide religious brochures for houses of worship at orientation for new student-athletes, Damon noted that nothing associated with church was discussed on his visits. If this is also the case for others, coaches may potentially miss key aspects of how religious student-athletes make decisions. Christianity permeates every aspect of a believer’s life--highlighted by these participants and explained in Colossians 3:17 from the Bible, which says, “And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.” Although student-athletes’ faith should not be used as a manipulative recruiting tool, management might wish to examine this crucial element in the makeup of some student-athletes. In higher education, where considerable emphasis is placed on external successes in academics and athletics, little attention has been given to the internal
development of students. In the college football arena, coaches are careful to utilize every detail
to sign major recruits for their programs. Why, then, would they ignore religion?

Even though no participants anticipated the religious backing of their administration,
Mark had certain desires. Note the distinction between expectations and desires. Expectation
connotes an anticipation or waiting for something to occur, while desire does not carry the
weight of expectation. Although some of these former student-athletes commented solely on
their lack of expectation, Mark briefly elaborated on what he desired during his athletic career,
saying, “When I first got on the team, I heard that there was a Bible Study, so I guess I wished
someone would always facilitate those Bible studies so I could attend them.” Mark hoped for
someone to facilitate Bible studies, but he was not specific with regard to who should lead them.

From these responses, it is evident that participants placed no religious expectations on
the athletic departments, and they offered no suggestions as to what the athletic department
should or should not provide. This is a difficult issue to navigate for university administration.
On the one hand, religion can be a major factor in a recruit’s decision to attend a university, but
public colleges are legally prohibited from endorsing religious activities. Still, there are legal
ways to allow employees of organizations, and in this case student-athletes, the freedom to
pursue and practice their religion.

**Research Question 3 and 4: Athletics, Social Setting, and Academics**

**Athletic influences:** Responses to research questions 3 and 4 disclosed various aspects of
college athletics that interacted with participants’ religious well-being. These different aspects
can be divided into influences and outcomes of religious well-being. The athletic influences
mentioned by these former student-athletes have been classified into categories: *Teammate-
Driven Religious Growth, Coaching and Administration Support,* and the *College Culture of*
Winning. Stevenson (1997) noted the difficulties of Christian student-athletes interacting with teammates who were not Christians. Most participants in this study also highlighted the importance of these relationships, with four indicating that their faith actually became stronger as a result of being challenged by nonreligious teammates. While many fall prey to peer pressure and allow those with different beliefs to negatively influence their religious well-being, religious student-athletes can have their views challenged and still experience religious growth. Kari remarked,

Those relationships definitely challenged me because my teammates were from all different backgrounds and all different faiths like Islam, atheism, and other kinds. They definitely questioned me sometimes, but I think that kind of makes your faith stronger.

Kari did not discuss the nature of her teammates’ questions, but indicated that there were people on the team from different religious backgrounds than her. Being questioned about faith may have caused Kari to become more knowledgeable about Christianity. Similarly, hostility from teammates towards religion positively influenced Mark’s religious well-being. He explained,

I had a few friends on the team who just hated religion and hated the idea of God and that hurts. Overall, I think those relationships made my faith stronger. I loved those guys. They are guys that I want to keep in touch with for a long time, and I know they love me and they knew exactly where I stood in my relationship with the Lord, and I knew where they stood and we didn’t think less about each other.

Even though Mark perceived there to be teammates who hated religion, he found that it strengthened his faith, and he loved those friends despite their differences. His religious well-being did not suffer because of these relationships. In fact, it taught him how to love others and to respect those who did not agree with his religious values. Ryan agreed with Leslie and Mark, but his teammates positively influenced his religious-well in a different way. He stated,

I would say that I did not have any practicing Christians as teammates, but at the same time, my relationships with all of my teammates positively affected my Christian life. I think that it opened my eyes to see that in looking at their life and looking at my life, I needed to be more serious about my faith. I think God used my teammates and just seeing
how they lived their life, that I needed to be more studious about my faith so that they
could see a difference in me or that I was not just going the course, but I was actually
growing.

Ryan gave a different reason why his nonreligious teammates impacted his religious well-being
in a positive way. While Kari mentioned the questions about her faith and Mark discussed his
love for his teammates, Ryan understood that he needed to be more studious in his faith as he
examined his teammates’ lifestyles. Looking at the way his teammates were living made him
realize that he needed to become a more serious student of Christianity. In this way, his religious
well-being was enhanced.

In addition to having impactful relationships with teammates, most of the participants
indicated that coaches and athletic administration were supportive of their religious pursuits.
Ryan illustrated how a university can be indirectly and legally supportive of students’ faith
without endorsing or promoting religion. He remarked,

I would say that the athletic department created a positive culture towards people of faith.
I never saw any negative sentiments towards Christian organizations. One year they
allowed an FCA [Fellowship of Christian Athletes] activity to take place at the Office of
Student Life, so I think they created a positive atmosphere toward Christian activity, even
when they didn’t directly support it.

Administration can show indirect support for student-athletes’ religious well-being without
endorsing a specific religion, and they should also review current case law related to religion in
sport. This athletic department did not make participants feel ashamed of their faith. Similarly,
coaches appear to play an integral role in the lives of players, as these former student-athletes
found that coaches had a positive effect on their religious well-being. Bryce was encouraged by
his coaches:

I’d say Coach Jackson had a positive impact on my religious well-being. He encouraged
it. On multiple occasions he asked about FCA and came to FCA when I asked him to
come. He was very supportive of me starting the baseball team Bible Study.
Bryce perceived Coach Jackson to be more direct in his support of religion than the athletic administration. Not only did he allow his players to express their faith, he vocally encouraged Bryce and even attended FCA when asked to come. Bryce also mentioned his coach’s support in forming a Bible Study specifically for the baseball team, giving Bryce the freedom to lead the group without the coach being there to directly influence it. Likewise, Damon’s coaching staff had a positive impact on his religious well-being. He said,

Even before team meetings, Coach Smith would talk about Christ. He would introduce Coach Jones to a few pastors, and he would allow a few of those pastors to come and be a part of the program and put on services for the players at the facility prior to practice, because he knew that practice time conflicted with normal church times.

Damon revealed a different aspect of a coach’s support for student-athletes’ religious well-being. He specifically discussed the concept of facilitation. Because there were few opportunities for players to go to church on Sunday, Coach Smith ensured that those who wanted to express their faith through a structured worship service had that chance. Damon experienced comfort from having a coach who gave players an opportunity to worship. Finally, Kari appreciated her coaches creating a culture of openness towards the practice of religion. She found it beneficial that her coaches shared similar values as her. She acknowledged,

It was definitely helpful at college to have coaches that were believers, just because they understood how important my faith was and how I was seeking the Lord when I was making decisions. It was great to have the openness to share that with them. I didn’t have any hostility with any coaches. I think they respected me.

Kari’s coaches understood the role of religion in her life, and that was helpful for her. However, while most participants emphasized the positive impact of coaches, the college culture of winning perhaps reinforced by coaches negatively influenced their religious well-being. Kari continued,
Winning was important. Obviously I wanted to win and I was working my hardest, but after college, I see how much I idolized the sport. Growing up playing it, I didn’t realize it was an idol in my life, but it totally was.

The term *idolize* references the Ten Commandments from the Old Testament in Exodus 20, where the Bible precludes followers of God from having idols before Him. Kari admitted that soccer became an idol for her. In addition, more than stating that winning was important, Mark explained that winning was everything for his football team. He disclosed,

> If anything, this culture had a negative impact on my [religious well-being]. To Coach Jones, winning was everything. He didn’t care to talk to you if you didn’t help the team win. It was programmed into me that winning was the most important thing in football. I knew that that is not true, but as far as performance, I knew that was what the coaches valued, so winning did become of utmost importance in football.

In a faith that calls followers of Christ to focus on the eternal over the temporary (e.g. 2 Corinthians 4:18), Christian athletes may face conflict when told that winning is more important than anything else. This attitude was programmed into Mark by the culture the coaching staff created, and it negatively impacted his religious well-being. Additionally, the Bible teaches Christians that the last will be first and the first will be last (e.g. Matthew 20:16), and implores them to deny themselves and follow Christ (e.g. Matthew 16:24). This may also generate tension in intercollegiate sport, where players are sometimes encouraged to win at all costs.

**Athletic outcomes:** While these former student-athletes identified specific athletic influences that impacted their religious well-being, they also revealed how their religious well-being affected their athletic performance. Knowing whether religious well-being affects athletic performance could have significant implications for college sports. Storch et al. (2001) discovered that religious student-athletes were better equipped to handle adversity related to being a student-athlete, and Dillon and Tait (2000) found a link between spirituality and being “in the zone” in team sports. In addition, religious well-being has been associated with key job
outcomes in the workforce (Milliman et al., 2003; Robert et al., 2006). Finally, Astin & Astin (2003) uncovered physiological and mental benefits connected with religious well-being in the general college student population.

Three primary themes emerged within athletic outcomes: Freedom from Pressure, Strong Work Ethic, and Coping with Injury. Several participants commented on freedom from pressure while performing. Ryan remarked,

For the most part, my faith had a very positive impact on my performance. I think that it helped me to see the bigger picture and to be able to perform with less pressure. So, I thought it helped me to play more freely. I tried to go into each game knowing that if I did my best and prepared my best in practice and just competed the best that I could that the results were not going to change the way that God sees me or how much He loves me. In that sense, I knew that the outcome of the game did not change the way that I was seen by God. I think it helped me play better because it took a lot of the pressure off to perform. If you always have that pressure to perform or to be seen a certain way by people or by God, then that could add pressure for you to perform.

Ryan highlighted God’s love for him and what that did for his mindset in competition.

Understanding how much God loved him allowed Ryan the freedom from pressure to perform, realizing that the results of his sport did not affect the way God viewed him. He also experienced freedom from worrying about how people viewed him. This taught him to ultimately trust the results to a higher power while still giving his best. Ryan talked about the mental benefits of his religious well-being, but other participants identified the physiological benefits. For instance, Sara felt more at peace before games because of her relationship with God:

This is really weird and kind of gross, but I would get really, really nervous my freshman year and throw up before games and was a hot mess. But because of my faith in God, all of that went away and I didn’t throw up before games or anything. I was way calmer because before I had put it all on myself, and it was about me and I had to do this and I had to do that and perform so people would like me. And after that, I just had a better perspective on things and so my true faith actually made me less nervous.

Sara’s faith in God directly affected her ability to maintain composure before games, and she experienced freedom from playing for people’s approval. However, her religious well-being also
provided her a physiological benefit, calming her nerves so she no longer threw up prior to
competition. She used to put all of the pressure to perform and succeed on her own shoulders,
but her religious well-being allowed her to release the burden of results and performance. In the
end, she found a better perspective on the game of basketball, which helped her to play with
greater peace on the court. Additionally, Sara identified a second athletic outcome experienced
by other participants: a strong work ethic. Sara continued,

My faith made me work harder as time went on and the glamour of college basketball
wore off and all of the stuff that they recruited you with and said to you they said to
everybody else. When all of those realities start kicking in and your coach is not playing
you, and you don’t really feel like showing up and playing hard for her, the whole reason
I was able to play my senior year was because of my faith. I actually had to think she is
my boss and I work for her. It really is beyond that because I am really playing for the
Lord. Am I playing for her? Am I playing for myself? Am I playing for the Lord?
Literally, day by day, I had to get in this mindset where even though I really want to go
punch my coach in the face, I’m not. I am actually going to be really cheery and a really
hard worker, and really encouraging of my teammates so that people think, ‘wait, she
should be upset, but she is not’ and then have to wonder what it is about me that is
different.

Sara disclosed various reasons for why she worked hard, giving maximum effort because she
was playing for more than her coach. Sara was blessed with the opportunity to play basketball to
glorify God. 1 Corinthians 10:3 mandates Christians to give the glory to God in everything that
they do, and Colossians 3:23 exhorts them to work with all of their hearts, working for the Lord
but not for man. Ultimately, Sara worked hard for God even when it appeared she was being
treated unfairly. Likewise, Mark played for a higher purpose, articulating,

I think my Christian faith made me work harder because I knew the Lord had put me
there and given me a gift to play football --not a gift that I was a great athlete, but it was
clear that I was there because the Lord wanted me there. I knew the Lord got me there
and He was going to be faithful to me so that helped me continue to press on. If I had
thought that I was just there for a fluke and Coach Jones just made a mistake, probably
after a year or so of not playing, I probably would have just given up and said, ‘this is just
too hard.’ I really started to pray and asked the Lord for help in a few areas of practice
and ball snapping and the Lord honored that and helped me with that, and there came a
point where I went from snapping very poorly to when I was on the field snapping well. I almost felt like it was a form of worship for me.

Mark viewed snapping as a form of worship to God, and he believes God blessed him for that. When Sara talked about her work ethic, she reasoned that she was playing for God so people would look at her life and wonder what was different about her. Mark also mentioned working hard for the Lord, but his motivation was that the Lord placed him there for a specific purpose. Not only did his religious well-being allow him to snap the ball better, it may also have been the reason he stayed on the team and continued to give his best. Mark treated football as an opportunity to show love and gratitude for all God had done for him.

Finally, in addition to a strong work ethic and freedom from playing under pressure, participants’ religious well-being allowed them to better cope with injury. For example, Leslie conveyed,

I think if most other people went through the same thing, injury-wise, they probably wouldn’t have stuck it out as long, and I think my faith had a lot to do with that. It made dealing with injury easy in the beginning because I was able to see that something good is going to come out of this. God has a purpose for everything, and I was trying to understand what that was.

Leslie possessed the faith to cope with a difficult, season-ending injury, and perceived dealing with her injury as easy because of her religious well-being. James 1:2 calls Christ-followers to “consider it joy whenever [they] face trials of many kinds” because of the good that results from enduring suffering. Romans 8:28 states, “We know all things work for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose.” Therefore, Leslie was able to cope with injury, because she knew something good was going to come out of the situation. Without her faith, she may have become despondent over her injuries. While Leslie’s religious well-being allowed her to respond positively to her injuries, Bryce believed God authored his healing process. He attributed his injury recovery to the power of God in his life, claiming, “My God
rescued me from a pretty significant injury my freshman year. I was able to get back out there and play and I wanted to make the most of it.” Bryce expressed gratitude towards God for giving him the chance to play baseball again when it was possible that his injury was career-threatening.

**Academic influences:** Nye (2005) has written about the testing of faith that Christian students face in public, secular universities. While Nye believes the higher education culture as a whole is opposed to Christianity, these former-student athletes did not experience hostility in the classroom directed towards their Christian faith. No one could recall a negative encounter with professors regarding religion. Bryce commented, “They never made me feel bad for believing in Jesus Christ. Several of them made it known in class what they believed in, but they never affected my faith or made me feel poor for what I believed in.” His relationships with professors had no effect on his religious well-being.

Kari’s professors did not strongly influence her religious well-being, but her primary reason was for the lack of relationships she had with them. Kari stated, “I didn’t really get to know them.” Nye’s research was not about student-athletes specifically, but about the general student population as a whole. Therefore, because of time constraints restricting student-athletes, it is feasible that they are unable to build relationships with professors like the general student population. A lack of impact from the academic arena permeated the entire academic influences section of the interview, revealing no major effect from classmates, tutors, or mentors on participants’ religious well-being.

**Academic outcomes:** Within athletics, participants viewed their sport as a way to honor God, working hard for Him because of their religious well-being. They expended maximum effort even in the midst of trials and tribulations and won respect from teammates as well. In
addition, Mooney (2010) discovered a positive correlation between academic performance and attendance at religious services, finding that the more frequently students attend church, the better they fare in the classroom. Similar to the Strong Work Ethic theme within athletic outcomes, participants identified a Calling to Excel academically, although they appeared less invested in school than athletics. Kari articulated,

I am called to do well and work hard. I wasn’t super like I had to get A’s in every class, but I also knew I was going to try hard and I wanted to do well. As a believer, we are called to do well and to work hard in our classes because we are called to a higher standard.

Kari was not called to perfection in her academic endeavors, but she did confirm the point that believers are called to a higher standard. Likewise, Sara was confident that her purpose was to glorify God through everything she did, including her studies. She sometimes failed to live up to the high standards in her life, but reminded herself to work hard academically for God’s glory. She said,

I had to study and was called to do things for the glory of God. Not that I always did that, but I would try to remind myself that you still need to make the right decisions, even though you feel like you are kind of over academics.

Sara expressed during her interview that towards the end of her academic career, she lost the motivation to finish strong. However, she pushed herself to study for a higher purpose. No participants identified a striving to excel academically because of the benefits it could bring them. This does not mean they were entirely selfless in their motives, but they indicated that their primary impetus for doing well in school was God. Again, if coaches and administrators fail to utilize a major source of motivation for student-athletes, they potentially miss a key portion of what makes them work hard and excel.

Another theme within academic outcomes was Taking Advantage of Opportunity. Many participants were athletes who had starting positions on their teams or played significant time
during their athletic careers. Although participants expressed their desire to work hard for God in athletics because of the opportunity He afforded them, they still had a passion for their respective sports for most of their lives. Their sport was something that, for the most part, they enjoyed doing. However, no one conveyed their enjoyment over studying for exams or completing homework assignments. Therefore, they gave other reasons for putting forth maximum effort in the classroom. While their goal may have been to obtain a job upon graduation or earn a degree, this was never mentioned. They perceived their hard work resulted from the call of God to higher standards and because of the opportunities that He provided them. Damon remarked,

The way I always looked at it was I was blessed to get an athletic scholarship and attend a university like UF, and without athletics I never would have been afforded that opportunity. When it came to academics, I would be like God gave me the opportunity to obtain a relatively cheap if not free education, and it would be a disservice to Him to not take advantage of it and not do my best and try hard.

Damon admitted that he would have been unable to progress academically without the blessing of athletic ability. He attempted to take advantage of his situation, working hard because the opportunity was God-given.

Bryce also viewed the chance to get an education as a blessing. Unlike Damon, Bryce would have probably attended a higher education institution without his athletic talent. However, he still viewed the ability to excel in school as a gift from God, commenting,

I felt like the Lord had blessed me with a sharp brain and I wanted to get a good degree. I didn’t want to waste my four years at South University. I wanted to go on to graduate school, and especially when I got injured my freshman year, that put my athletic pursuits on the back burner and my academic pursuits reached a whole new level, because it was the only thing I had to focus on for about six months there. I always tried to get the best grade that I could and worked hard because I felt like anything less than that I would not be showing my gratefulness to my Lord and my parents, but mainly my Lord.
Bryce expressed gratitude for his parents and his Lord, perceiving his intelligence to be a blessing from God that allowed him to obtain a degree. Bryce echoed Damon’s thoughts, stating that anything less than his best would be a disservice to the Lord.

**Social influences:** Stevenson (1997) examined the importance of social status within the college sporting culture, identifying a desire student-athletes have for popularity. Responses within social influences revealed multiple themes related to the social status of college student-athletes—*Social Identity, Prestige and Popularity, and Lack of Peer Pressure.* Before discussing these themes, Bryce conveyed the significance of social status for athletes. He remarked, “Social status was of paramount importance. Right or wrong, you already have a higher status. Your peers look up to you as a student-athlete.” For some student-athletes, one’s standing on the team and on campus becomes an identity. Mark admitted,

> Whether or not you take a cocky athlete or a humble athlete, because of how much time we spend in sports, as much as I hate to admit it, it kind of becomes your identity. I tried to fight it. You hate to make a sport your identity, but when you do it so much, it kind of sneaks in. It becomes your identity to people around school and people associate you with that, and I’m sure some people find that more important than others and they think they are more important than other people. I think the biggest thing is that you do it so much that it becomes your job, like a lawyer or whatever. That is what you are doing all of the time. Your title, I guess. People liked being seen as a Gator athlete, or Division 1 athlete.

Because of the significant time involvement in practicing and competing, Mark found it challenging to maintain an identity not revolved around his sport. He also commented that some people felt more important than others because they were identified as student-athletes. Kari agreed, “You are defined by your game, if you are playing or not playing. You are on campus and people know you. You go to these parties and you have to have this reputation.” Most implied that they were well-known among the student population because of athletics. Moreover, Leslie stated,
I think that here in the culture at South University, athletes are ‘it.’ In general, I think people want to be like student-athletes. They want to hangout with athletes. It is a source of pride for athletes and from my perspective, a part of their identity.

Student-athletes were not only well-known on campus, but participants believed that others wanted to be like them and spend time with them in social settings. Mark, Kari, and Leslie believed social status defined other athletes and even themselves at times.

In addition, the importance of social status not only emerged because of the identity that it provided, but also because various student-athletes searched for prestige as members of the high-profile intercollegiate sporting culture. Sara said, “Socially, you are around the high-profile people, so it is hard not to feel like you should try to be more high-profile.” Many student-athletes attempted to achieve a specific level of popularity on campus. Damon agreed,

Everybody wanted to be that popular kid. Everyone knew that the jocks were looked up to. Even in coming to college, I think everybody wants to do what they have to do in order to have a high-profile social status like they did in high school.

Damon explained that the need to be seen as a popular member of the social scene began in high school, where jocks and cheerleaders were admired.

Stevenson (1997) described the expectation Christian student-athletes felt from others to go to clubs, parties, and bars, sensing pressure to attend social functions that did not line up with their beliefs. However, most participants in the current study did not feel a lot of pressure to go to parties where they would be uncomfortable, experiencing some early on in their college years when it was difficult to stand up for what they believed. Leslie only felt pressure from within, stating,

I think doing that partying while you are training hard and everybody is going through the same thing bonds you on another level socially as part of a team. There is good and bad to that. Certainly, there are all kinds of good and bad things that can happen when you are out past midnight. I think it bonds you past athletics. I maybe put pressure on myself, but it wasn’t like anyone else put it on me. I wanted to be hanging out. I wanted to be out having fun.
Leslie was not forced to be out at night with the team, but wanted to be a part of the festivities, seeing it as a time to bond with teammates. Similarly, Kari enjoyed spending time with teammates and viewed the social setting as a place for that to happen outside of athletics. However, she was not forced to do everything else her team was doing. She commented,  

There were parties that I did attend and I didn’t necessarily drink, but for me, no, there weren’t any social expectations. I wanted to be with my friends and my teammates and I wanted to hang with them, but I wasn’t necessarily doing everything they were doing.

Relationships with teammates were something that these former student-athletes sought after and desired to cultivate, viewing it as critical to spend time outside of practice with one another. Damon was not pressured by anyone specifically, but believed going out to parties and clubs was just what athletes did. He thought it was a norm of the student-athlete world. He said,  

I wouldn’t say it was too much of an expectation, but it was kind of like a cultural norm. When you see it on TV, when you watch a college movie, what are the athletes doing? They are at the parties getting drunk and womanizing multiple females, so growing up, we are brainwashed into believing that is how you are supposed to be once you get to college. Typically coming in as a freshman, you look up to the older guys, and if they are doing it, you are going to do it as well. I wouldn’t say it is expected, but you come in feeling that that is what you are going to be doing.

Damon experienced no expectations from teammates, but was part of a culture that taught him from an early age how athletes were supposed to act. He identified the media, culture, and peers as those responsible for setting the student-athlete norms, making an essential point about older teammates. This quote suggests that if certain illicit activities are going to be curtailed within the student-athlete culture, it may be most effective to mold junior and senior athletes into role models, rather than simply telling freshman and sophomores how they should behave. Damon believed that younger players look to the actions of veteran student-athletes more than they listen to coaches or administrators speaking to them about making wise choices and avoiding precarious situations.
Overall, the potentially harmful influences of social status and the temptations of alcohol and partying did not negatively affect the religious well-being of participants. In addition to the traditional social setting, churches and parachurch organizations were viewed as social influences on student-athletes’ religious well-being. Nye (2005) and Waller, Dzikus, and Hardin (2008) have examined the role of churches, parachurch organizations, and chaplains in the lives of college students and specifically student-athletes. Within social influences, the *Parachurch Impact* was more significant than that of any church or chaplain. Damon expressed,

I think the one that made the biggest influence on me would be the FCA and teammate-led Bible study sessions. To me they were more specific, versus when you go to a church they are addressing the needs of the church and you have different demographics in the church—different age brackets, male and female—whereas, whenever I went to the intimate teammate-led Bible studies, they were more impactful on my life. The reason why is because you are with your peers and you are all facing the same pressures and same temptation, and you can learn from each other.

Damon highlighted why parachurch organizations, as compared to churches, were more effective from his point of view at reaching student-athletes. While there was nothing particularly negative about local churches he attended during college, he appreciated the parachurch groups because they were able to cater to athletes, whereas churches met the needs of a larger range of ages and backgrounds. Ultimately, he wanted a more intimate setting where others were going through many of the same struggles he faced in his daily walk as a Christian athlete. Kari concurred with Damon, expressing “I think parachurch organizations are helpful. They encourage you. They have people there who are like you—their faith is important to them.” Like Damon, she was more involved in a parachurch organization than a church, desiring to be with people of similar lifestyles. Two participants, Ryan and Sara, were very involved in their churches during college, but they were in the minority. Mark was another student-athlete who enjoyed being a part of the campus ministries of FCA and CRU—formerly Campus Crusade for
Christ. He explained, “Parachurch organizations had a lot of impact. FCA certainly did and Crusade did. Those were the things I looked forward to throughout the entire week. I looked forward to going and worshipping and hearing the message.” Parachurch organizations played a major role in the religious well-being of these former student-athletes.

Finally, friends in college potentially play a major role in student-athletes’ lives. A theme that emerged was the Positive Influence of Friends outside of the sporting world. In fact, several participants found it easier to build friendships outside of athletics, and these friends appeared to have a positive impact on their religious well-being. For example, Kari disclosed,

I wouldn’t say it was tough to make Christian friends. At South University, with FCA, just having friends who were not in the sport or in the athlete world was just so refreshing to me. I needed accountability, and I knew I would get it from those friends. I don’t think it was that hard, but you have to make it a priority. You have to go out and make those friends. It is really easy to stay in the comfort bubble of the athletes.

Kari was refreshed to have friends who were outside athletics, and she needed the Christian accountability those close relationships provided. She also stated that because athletes’ schedules were “insane,” she spent her limited free time with friends from the general student population. It may have been more comfortable to stay in the athlete bubble, but she ultimately made it a priority to find friends outside of her comfort zone.

Ryan found it easier to build those relationships, remarking, “I would say it was not difficult. For me, it was easier to make Christian friends with other students outside of athletics.” Ryan’s experiences with parachurch organizations helped him connect with others. He continued, “At FCA, there were so many students and a smaller number of athletes.” While FCA stands for Fellowship of Christian Athletes, at South University very few athletes actually attended the weekly services. Bryce also utilized FCA as an effective avenue to find Christian friends, saying, “I was blessed to have the majority of my good friends not on the baseball team.
The good friends that I hung out with when I was not around the baseball team were mainly FCA guys.” Overall, friends outside of athletics had a positive effect on the religious well-being of participants.

**Social outcomes:** While specific social influences—clubs and bars, parachurch organizations, and friendships—impacted the religious well-being of these former student-athletes, there were also social outcomes that resulted because of participants’ religious well-being. The primary social outcomes identified were *Abstinence from Alcohol and Sexual Activity.* The majority of participants refrained from sexual promiscuity and the consumption of alcohol in most situations. Christian student-athletes are often faced with the dilemma of holding fast to their religious beliefs or following the crowd with regard to excessive alcohol use and sexual behavior (Stevenson, 1997). The Bible repeatedly commands believers to remain sexually pure, stating in 1 Corinthians 6:18, “Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body.” In addition, 1 Thessalonians 4:3-5 teaches, “For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God.” The Bible avoids teaching that Christians never sin or fall prey to sexual immorality, but it commands them, for their own benefit, to set sexual purity as the standard to follow in life. Most participants took the call of sexual purity seriously. Damon’s religious well-being influenced his sexual activity, admitting,

Before you made a weekend decision or decision to go out, or participate in a certain activity, your religious belief affected that. I would ask myself, ‘Is this what God wants me to do? Is this really something that is benefiting His kingdom?’ My Christian faith helped me make more responsible decisions and I gained more meaningful relationships. Once you have a strong religious faith, you want to seek someone with a similar background, similar beliefs. My faith kept me away from a lot of loose women.
The social benefits of Dorian’s religious well-being included wisdom in building the right friendships, making responsible social decisions, and staying away from immoral women. He asked God about specific choices he had to make, questioning whether an activity was something that benefitted God’s kingdom. This phenomenon was not specific to football, as Ryan expressed that some of his basketball teammates used their athlete status to attract women. He commented,

A lot of times the guys would go meet girls or they would use their status as a basketball player, I think, to try and meet girls and I didn’t do that either. I think my faith really affected me in just not doing what a lot of the other guys on the team did.

Similarly, Mark’s Christian faith not only kept him from sexual promiscuity, but caused him to see that way of life in a completely different way than most of his teammates and fellow student-athletes. He disclosed, “My faith also disgusted me more towards the sexually active lifestyle. It made me realize how gross that it is to be sleeping around.” Mark was disgusted with the sexually active lifestyle around him and looked at engaging in sexual behavior with various people as gross, attributing this attitude to his faith. He may have still been disturbed by this lifestyle had he not been a Christian, but he perceived that his faith impacted his views on the issue.

Many verses in the Bible address the topic of alcohol consumption. For example, Ephesians 5:18 states, “And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit.” This piece of Scripture precludes extreme indulgence in sensual pleasures specifically associated with the act of getting drunk. All participants expressed their opinions on alcohol consumption and were united behind avoiding alcohol in most situations. Sara said that because of her religious well-being she “didn’t touch alcohol.” Ryan agreed, stating, “The guys on the team would go out and drink or get drunk, but I did not participate in that.” Likewise,
Mark did not drink alcohol before he was 21, using that decision as a way to witness to teammates about Christianity. He divulged,

I made it a goal of mine that before I was 21, I did not want to drink. That gave me a little bit of a witnessing tool, and I was able to share my faith a little with that. My faith helped me to decide not to do that up until I was 21.

Mark identified a key finding about the drinking behavior of Christian student-athletes: in a public university setting, abstaining from alcohol is not a private decision. Even if athletes in private make the choice not to drink alcohol, their teams and some of the student-athlete population typically discover it. Therefore, social decisions become a way to express one’s faith, since Christians are called in 2 Corinthians 5:20 to be ambassadors of Christ and are designated in Matthew 5:14 to be the “light of the world. The Bible does not teach Christians to be silent about their faith, and these former student-athletes used their social behavior as a witness to their relationship with God and love for Him. Kari disclosed,

My faith definitely affected that part of my life. To drink or not to drink when you are 19? I would still go to parties, but not drink, and I remember the boys would just drink for us. We really weren’t made fun of for it too much, but I definitely made decisions. I felt like it was important for me to still have fun with my teammates and be there to just make a different decision than what they were making just based on my belief. I wasn’t called to judge them. I still loved them and wanted to hang out with them, and that is a part of being a Christian in the world but not of the world.

Kari’s religious well-being influenced her decision to abstain from alcohol. She also tried to be a part of the world and love all people without being of the world and following everything they did. While she still stood up for her faith, Kari was able to make close friends on her team, withholding judgment and loving everyone regardless of their beliefs or behavior. However, she chose not to drink alcohol because of her religion. Each participant mentioned abstinence from sexual immorality or avoidance of alcohol consumption as social outcomes resulting from their religious well-being.
CHAPTER 5
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Research had yet to examine college athletes’ expectations of opportunities for religious growth at public, secular institutions of higher learning. The present study sought to address this gap in the literature. In addition, participants’ views on the athletic, academic, and social factors influencing religious well-being were explored, as well as the outcomes they believed were associated with the quality of their religious life. If religious student-athletes make many decisions on and off the court, field, or pitch through a spiritual lens and view their faith as the most important element in their lives, then coaches, administrators and academicians could be missing a key portion of what drives them.

In order to fulfill these purposes, the following research questions provided the foundation for the study: (1) What are the perceptions of religious student-athletes of their own religious well-being throughout their college careers? (2) What do religious student-athletes expect management (i.e., coaches and administrators) to do to foster this desired religious well-being? (3) Which athletic, academic, and social influences impacted their religious well-being? Finally, (4) what effect does the fostering or hindering of religious well-being have on specific athletic, academic and social outcomes?

The data reveals that participants had minimal expectations for athletic administration with regard to fostering religious growth. While each participant indicated some desire to grow as Christians during college, they did not place responsibility on the athletic department to help in that purpose. Most participants expressed a complete lack of expectation, while one former student-athlete briefly commented on his desire for religious development in some capacity while at school. Another participant shared his ideas for administration potentially using religion as a recruiting tool.
Even though participants had no expectation for management in enhancing their religious well-being, the athletic department evidently created a positive culture towards religious growth. Nearly all of the participants suggested that their athletic department positively influenced their religious well-being, even if most of that impact was indirect. This highlights one key implication for management in intercollegiate sport. Coaches and administrators can positively influence the religious expression of student-athletes while maintaining a spirit of neutrality towards any specific religion. Athletic departments can provide information about religious clubs and organizations on campus, as well as houses of worship available to prospective and current student-athletes at their schools. They can point student-athletes in the right direction when appropriate, and in this way, they can be supportive of individual students’ religious views without specifically endorsing one religion over another.

This sample viewed their religious well-being as intimately connected with their athletic, academic, and social lives. Teammates, coaches, and athletic administration had a positive effect overall on participants’ religious well being. However, the college culture of winning, which was potentially shaped by the same coaches and administrators, had a negative impact. In the academic realm, these former student-athletes experienced no negative or positive influences on religious well-being. Finally, in the social setting, the prestige, popularity, and social identity that came with being student-athletes conflicted with the Christian values of participants. However, as a whole, they experienced very little peer pressure to act or think a certain way and were positively impacted by parachurch organizations like FCA and Campus Crusade for Christ.

While this qualitative study did not attempt to directly link religious well-being with athletics, academics, or social decisions, potential outcomes were identified through participant responses. As a group, they viewed their sport and academic performances as means by which
they could express their love for God. In athletics, some of these former student-athletes described their ability to positively cope with injury and play with freedom from pressure of man or God because of their faith. Nearly all participants revealed that their religious well-being pushed them to work hard and give maximum effort in practices and competition for the glory of God. Similarly, in academics, participants expressed a desire to take advantage of their God-given educational opportunities and excel in the classroom. Socially, participants attempted to avoid sexual promiscuity and alcohol in most situations because of their religious well-being, and used these choices as a way to witness to others about their Christian faith. These results strongly suggest that participants had a high level of intrinsic religiosity, as they integrated their faith into nearly every aspect of their lives, highlighting athletic, academic, and social benefits related to their religious well-being.

**Limitations**

Because of its qualitative design and sample size, this study inherently lacked the ability to generalize to a larger population. In addition to the small number of participants, the sample only included student-athletes from five sports at the same institution from 2003 to 2009. Therefore, I have no ability to apply these results beyond this study, other than the potential speculation of what may occur in other schools, athletic programs, or sports in different periods of time.

Moreover, researcher bias is a potential problem in qualitative studies that use one-on-one interviews as the main method of data collection. As I disclosed, I am a Christian, and I entered the interview process holding preconceived ideas of what it means to be a Christian because of my life experiences and time in a Christian home and church. I thought carefully about this when forming and asking questions, as well as when I responded to participants’
answers. However, as Edward and Skinner (2009) note, it is critical to consider the researcher’s bias since it is the researcher who attempts to uncover the meaning of the lived experience from the subjective perspectives of the persons who participate (Edwards & Skinner, 2009). Although I attempted to remain objective throughout the research process, as the interpreter I had prior knowledge that affected my objectivity, and I most likely interpreted according to my own lived experiences (Walters, 1995).

Another potential problem with the interview process is related to the impact of the researcher on the group being studied. It is possible that groups are altered by the very presence of a researcher, and therefore answer in an artificial way or respond with intentional deception because of a desire to be perceived in a positive light. This is especially relevant in my case, as I had already interacted with participants at some level during my undergraduate studies. I knew of this danger before the interviews, and thus encouraged these former student-athletes to speak truthfully, reminding them of the condition of anonymity. However, there was little opportunity to evaluate the credibility or authenticity of participants’ statements.

Additionally, participants were former student-athletes and were therefore asked to look into their past, rather than being questioned about their current perceptions as student-athletes. In essence, participants were required to recall their thoughts and remember what they felt like when they were at the university. This weakness may have been offset by a concurrent benefit. Because they were not currently engaged as student-athletes, it may have allowed them to look back at their time in college as objective observers, rather than being trapped in the moment. As young adults, they have had time to dwell on their college years and were able to clearly explain their past experiences to me.
**Future Research**

As participants revealed, student-athletes face enormous pressure to perform at the highest level in athletics, maintain success in the classroom, and make decisions about how to behave socially. Bryce, a former student-athlete at South University, remarked that one can either grow in religious well-being during college or succumb to the pressures of campus life and stray from their walk with God. Most participants found that being a student-athlete positively impacted their religious well-being, but for some, the process was much more difficult to handle. The results of this study warrant further investigation into how certain individuals are more successful at managing the pressures that influence religious well-being and what specific actions make them successful. Research in this area could benefit from discovering effective ways to foster the religious well-being of religious athletes, which could potentially lead to some of the positive outcomes identified by participants.

Additionally, much of the literature review focused on research in the field of spirituality and workplace performance. If college athletes are deemed to be employees of organizations, it will be important for athletic administrators and coaches to understand the job satisfaction literature and other job-related outcomes (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000; Milliman, Czaplewski, & Ferguson, 2003; Robert, Young, & Kelly, 2006) to see if they translate to intercollegiate sports. Job satisfaction, reduction of turnover, decreased absenteeism, and increased levels of job involvement and organizational commitment could be relevant and significant to athletic teams and organizations. Athletic administration may also wish to examine the benefits in athletic performance, academic progress, and social decisions resulting from religious well-being, as well as the culture and attitude the athletic department creates for the expression of religion. The
current study reveals potential key outcomes associated with religious well-being in intercollegiate athletics.

Some participants expressed that there is a cultural norm associated with athletics revolving around the social setting, popularity and prestige, and the consumption of alcohol. The current landscape calls for research on how to best curtail alcohol-related crime among the student-athlete population. Research has shown a connection between crime and alcohol use within college students as a whole (Abbey, 2002; Abbey, McAuslan, & Ross, 1998; Harrington & Leitenberg, 1994), but there is a gap in the literature that could be filled by more studies on alcohol-related criminal activity and college student-athletes. Additionally, in a sport culture where athletes have nutritionists and athletic trainers to maintain peak physical condition, it may be significant to ask certain student-athletes why they still drink alcohol in light of the negative effects it may have on athletic performance (Shirreffs & Maughan, 2006; Volpe, 2010). Astin and Astin (2003) found a link between the avoidance of alcohol and physical well-being. Therefore, with research revealing that abstinence from alcohol consumption is directly related with physical health and well-being and with the dangerous drinking practices exhibited by college students in America (Wechsler, Lee, Kuo, Seibring, Nelson, & Lee, 2002), it may be beneficial to shed light on why student-athletes continue to excessively consume alcohol in some situations.

Finally, more legal research related to religion and higher education at public institutions is warranted. Cash & Gray (2000) discuss how a company can honor the religious manifestation requests of its employees without endorsing any particular belief. Students’ individual religious expression requests can be granted while the administration remains neutral about religion as a whole. Cash and Gray also suggest that not only are there legal ways to accommodate religious
employees, but there are negative consequences associated with denying religious manifestation requests, as human resource professionals are reporting an increased number of cases pertaining to this issue. Management is not required to honor practices that disrupt efficiency and productivity, but because of the potential benefits associated with religious well-being in the workplace, it will be important to research how this issue relates to higher education and intercollegiate athletics, and how public institutions can remain in compliance with the law.
APPENDIX A
INTERVIEW GUIDE

Phase 1: General Inquiry
1. Would you consider yourself a religious person as you entered college?
2. If so, what did you expect for your religious life during college?
3. In what ways did you practice your religion?
4. What did you expect from your university and athletic department with regard to your religious life?
5. How would you characterize your overall religious well-being and development throughout college? Did it change?

Phase 2: Influences

Athletic Influences
1. How did your relationship with teammates affect your religious well-being?
2. How did your relationship with coaches affect your religious well-being?
3. How did your relationship with administration affect your religious well-being?
4. How did your relationship with opponents affect your religious well-being?
5. How did the importance of winning affect your religious well-being?

Social Influences
1. Characterize the importance of social status for student-athletes.
2. As athletes, were you expected to attend parties, clubs and bars, and various hangout spots both on and off campus?
3. What role did churches, parachurch organizations like FCA or Campus Crusade, and chaplains play during your time on campus?
4. Was it difficult to make Christian friends outside your team?

Academic Influences
1. What role did professors play in your religious development and well-being?
2. What role did classmates play in your religious well-being?
3. Were there any tutors or mentors that significantly impacted this area of your life?

Phase 3: Outcomes
1. Can you identify any positive or negative athletic outcomes that resulted from your religious well-being in college?
2. Can you identify any positive or negative social outcomes that resulted from your religious well-being in college?
3. Can you identify any positive or negative academic outcomes that resulted from your religious well-being in college?
# APPENDIX B
## DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

### Table B-1. Demographic information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mark</th>
<th>Leslie</th>
<th>Ryan</th>
<th>Bryce</th>
<th>Damon</th>
<th>Kari</th>
<th>Sara</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td>25</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Race</strong></td>
<td>White</td>
<td>White/Hispanic</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sport</strong></td>
<td>Football</td>
<td>Swimming</td>
<td>Basketball</td>
<td>Baseball</td>
<td>Football</td>
<td>Soccer</td>
<td>Basketball</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Religious Affiliation</strong></td>
<td>Southern Baptist</td>
<td>Inter-denominational</td>
<td>Southern Baptist</td>
<td>Methodist/Baptist</td>
<td>Non-denominational</td>
<td>Non-denominational</td>
<td>Non-denominational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong># of Seasons at South University</strong></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SEC Championships</strong></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>NCAA Championships</strong></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table C-1. Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Athletic Influences</th>
<th>Athletic Outcomes</th>
<th>Academic Influences</th>
<th>Academic Outcomes</th>
<th>Social Influences</th>
<th>Social Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teammate-driven religious growth</td>
<td>Freedom from pressure</td>
<td>No impact</td>
<td>Calling to excel</td>
<td>Social Identity</td>
<td>Abstinence from Alcohol and Sexual Activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coach and Administration Support</td>
<td>Strong Work Ethic</td>
<td>Taking Advantage of Opportunity</td>
<td>Prestige and Popularity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College Culture of Winning</td>
<td>Coping with Injury</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of Peer Pressure</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Parachurch Impact</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Influence of Friends</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF REFERENCES


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Matthew William Seitz was born in Daytona Beach, Florida. The second of four children, he grew up in Port Orange, Florida, graduating from Spruce Creek High School in 2004. He earned his Bachelor of Science in business administration, majoring in marketing, and his Master of Science in sport management from the University of Florida (UF) in 2008 and 2012, respectively. Matthew was a committed leader in the Fellowship of Christian Athletes organization on campus.

Upon graduating in August 2012 with his M.S. in sport management, Matthew spent five months in Kenya and Tanzania, fulfilling his passion and the call of God to serve orphans and the lowly in third-world countries. Matthew has visited six African nations in total, including Uganda, Zambia, Botswana, and Ghana. In his latest trip in 2012, Matthew and his younger brother Steve worked with orphans, operated soccer camps, served in medical clinics, and shared the Good News of Jesus Christ with people in Kenya, Tanzania, and Ghana. Upon graduation from UF with his B.S. in business administration in 2008, Matthew was employed by Champion Forest Baptist Church in Houston, Texas, where he was the research assistant to the pastor and a member of the marketing and communications team for the church.

Matthew is a Ph.D. student in the counseling psychology program at the University of Tennessee (UT) in Knoxville, TN. He enrolled at UT in August 2012, and after completing his doctoral degree, he will pursue a career in sport psychology as well as Christian counseling to glorify Jesus Christ in both of these realms.