

## Article

# Sports Chaplaincy, Theology and Social Theory Disrupting Performance-Based Identity in Elite Sporting Contexts

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**Abstract:** Existing literature on the work of sports chaplains has focused primarily on practitioner accounts of chaplaincy with elite athletes. While these narratives provide useful descriptions of personal experience and practical application, they are largely devoid of theoretical grounding. This paper seeks to address this imbalance by proposing the need for sports chaplains to have a more critical understanding of sport and its relational dynamics. We begin by problematizing some of the historical assumptions underpinning elite sport, especially in relation to identity formation. We then explore some of the moral dilemmas which may be experienced by Christian athletes who inhabit contemporary sporting contexts. In line with the work of established sociological scholars, we then move to a critical analysis of performance-based identity and how an understanding of sociological concepts and ideas might assist chaplains in their work with elite athletes. The paper concludes by identifying sports chaplains as key figures in the disruption of performance-based identity.

**Keywords:** sport; chaplaincy; social theory; performance-based identity; elite athletes

## 1. Introduction

Connections between the sacred and sport have long since been acknowledged and recent years have witnessed an increasing amount of discussion and debate around the sport–religion interface. In turn, a significant body of related scholarly work has emerged mapping these connections across a range of geographical and religious landscapes (see, for example, [Watson and Parker 2013a, 2014](#); [Parker et al. 2016](#); [Adogame et al. 2017](#); [Hemmings et al. 2019a](#); [Hoven et al. 2019](#)).<sup>1</sup> These accounts provide useful insight into the different ways in which sport (and physical activity) has been appropriated by specific belief systems and the challenges and responses that such practices have encountered both in sporting and religious locales. During the same period, there has been a growing interest in sports chaplaincy as a particular form of ministry. Existing literature on the work of sports chaplains has focused primarily on practitioner accounts of chaplaincy within elite sports settings. Yet, while these narratives provide useful descriptions of personal experience and practical application, they are largely devoid of theoretical grounding. This paper seeks to address this imbalance by proposing the need for sports chaplains to have a more critical understanding of the world of sport and its relational dynamics, thereby being in a stronger position to improve the wellbeing of elite athletes ([Feddersen et al. 2020](#)).

Recent research has indicated that entrenched beliefs and attitudes in elite sport are often rooted in unhelpful historical assumptions surrounding sport per se ([Coakley 2015](#)), which legitimize coercive

<sup>1</sup> For further insight, see: [Parker and Watson \(2015, 2017a, 2017b\)](#); [Watson et al. \(2020\)](#); and [Twietmeyer et al. \(2018\)](#).

and destructive workplace cultures, typified by problematic expectations, behaviours, and practices (Cushion and Jones 2006; Feddersen et al. 2020; Manley and Williams 2019; Parker and Manley 2016, 2017; Roderick 2006a). In turn, elite athletes, both Christian and non-Christian, are required to continually negotiate and navigate such challenging dynamics and, in order to do this, they often draw upon support from a range of helping professionals, including that which is available from sports chaplains (Roe and Parker 2016; King et al. 2020; Fleming and Parker 2020; Whitmore and Parker 2020).

In this paper, we argue that those responsible for the training and education of sports chaplains (i.e., organizational leaders and practitioner advocates across the broader sports chaplaincy network) should be encouraged to incorporate aspects of sociological literature into programmes that seek to equip and prepare these chaplains for active service. More precisely, as the role of the sports chaplain continues to evolve (see, for example, Waller 2016), it is our suggestion that, moving forward, a more in-depth consideration of the social composition of sporting contexts be promoted as an auxiliary tenet of the sports chaplain's armoury. In what follows, we promote the exposure of sports chaplains to a range of key sociological concepts and ideas in order to help them develop a broader vocabulary, literacy and understanding around which they might critically evaluate the complex and often problematic dynamics of elite sports contexts. In particular, we suggest that such developments have the potential to better equip sports chaplains to perform a key aspect of their role—the disruption of 'performance-based identity' in the lives of elite athletes (see Lipe 2013a, 2013b; Null 2008a).<sup>2</sup>

We believe that exposure to these concepts and ideas (which feature large in broader socio-cultural analyses of sport), may allow sports chaplains to more fully appreciate the complexities of how athletes often construct and sustain their identities in line with the historical assumptions that continue to shape elite sport. Correspondingly, such exposure has the potential to enhance sports chaplains' understandings of how a disruption of these processes of identity construction may support athlete wellbeing via a greater knowledge of the pitfalls and consequences of performance-based identities, which include burnout, depression, anxiety, addiction, and suicide (Brewer et al. 1993).

In order to develop our argument, we begin with a brief discussion of the day-to-day work of the sports chaplain. We then move to a problematisation of some of the historical assumptions and attitudes underpinning identity formation in elite sport, exploring how these may serve to promote a normalised adherence to a performance-based identity, thereby creating a series of moral dilemmas for Christian athletes who inhabit contemporary sporting contexts. In line with the work of established sociological scholars, we then set out a critical analysis of performance-based identity and how an understanding of sociological concepts and ideas might assist sports chaplains in their work with elite athletes. The paper concludes by identifying sports chaplains as key agentic figures in the disruption of performance-based identity.

## 2. The Work of the Sports Chaplain

It has been observed by a number of sociological scholars that elite sport is a highly complex and turbulent working environment, which brings with it a whole range of challenging circumstances and dynamics for athletes, not least those surrounding injury, de-selection, and career transition (enforced or otherwise) (see, for example, Brown and Potrac 2009; Stamp et al. 2019; Jones and Denison 2017; Roderick 2006a, 2006b, 2006c, 2012, 2014; Roderick et al. 2000; Parker 2006; Parker and Manley 2016). Such events can present significant consequences for athlete wellbeing including a proliferation of mental health issues (i.e., depression and anxiety, eating disorders, addictions, substance misuse, and a range of other harmful practices and behaviours), all of which the sports chaplain may be called upon to deal with (see Gamble et al. 2013; King et al. 2020).

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<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of the present discussion, we use the term 'performance-based identity' to denote instances where elite athletes develop an identity exclusively from (and in relation to) their involvement and achievements in sport, thereby negating and neglecting other parts of their lives (i.e., health, relationships, and alternative ventures) to achieve their performance goals (Gustafsson et al. 2018).

Of course, nowadays elite athletes often have, at their disposal, a range of helping professionals to assist them in the negotiation and navigation of such circumstances. For example, in the major sports, sport psychologists are a routine feature of in-house support teams, as are welfare, safeguarding, and family liaison officers (see [Oliver and Parker 2019](#); [Hemmings et al. 2019a, 2019b](#)). The role of coach has also more recently been framed as one that might include the duties of ‘ethical carer’ for the athlete. For example, [Passmore \(2009\)](#) has purported that, as individuals in positions of power (and where appropriate), coaches should undertake ethical decision making on the part of their athletes. Likewise, leading coach education scholars have suggested that coaches should assume ethical responsibility to routinely problematize and re-evaluate the ways in which normative coaching practices might impact the fortunes of elite athletes ([Denison and Avner 2011](#); [Denison et al. 2014](#)). Of course, this process of ethical caring is not straightforward given that elite sport is essentially geared towards athlete performance. Indeed, by definition, the roles of the sports psychologist and coach are ultimately focused on the optimal performance of the athlete and/or the fortunes of the wider team/organisation. This scenario means that these roles carry with them an unavoidable obligation to continually assess whether an individual is fit (emotionally and/or physically) to compete. In contrast (and when present), sports chaplains take an altogether more person-centred and non-judgmental approach, which, rather than being influenced by, or pre-occupied with, a need to facilitate performance, seeks instead to focus on the holistic wellbeing of the individual concerned.

In more recent years, chaplaincy has gained increased prominence across the sporting spectrum with chaplains (both lay and ordained) inhabiting sporting locales from grassroots to elite level. Mirroring broader models of chaplaincy provision (see [Ryan 2015, 2018](#); [Threlfall-Holmes 2011](#)),<sup>3</sup> sports chaplains seek to provide spiritual and pastoral care to athletes and communities of ‘all faiths and none’ (i.e., players, coaches/managers, auxiliary staff) and may be called upon to deal with a range of issues that impact individual wellbeing (i.e., injury, career termination, bereavement, addiction), and/or if ordained, to officiate over religious services and ceremonies (i.e., weddings, funerals etc.) (see [Heskins and Baker 2006](#); [Waller 2016](#)).<sup>4</sup> In many cases (though not all), sports chaplaincy provision is delivered on a volunteer basis and some have argued that this enables chaplains to maintain a greater sense of objectivity and distance from the organisations in which they work and from discussions with coaches and managers regarding athlete performance ([Gamble et al. 2013](#)). In turn, there is evidence of sports chaplains seeking to build working relationships with other helping professionals (see [Hemmings and Chawner 2019](#)). Like chaplains in a host of secular spheres, sports chaplains seek to journey with athletes in their careers, often acting as mentors, life coaches or even surrogate parents (see [Lipe 2006](#); [Watson 2016](#)), with the aim of maintaining a consistent presence and building longer term, trusting relationships with those they encounter ([Paget and McCormack 2006](#); [Holm 2009](#); [Parker et al. 2016](#); [Threlfall-Holmes and Newitt 2011](#)). A key role of the sports chaplain is to ‘shepherd’ his or her athletes ([Waller and Cottom 2016](#)), helping in the ‘holistic growth and development of each individual entrusted to their care’ ([Marinese 2016](#), p. 135), and walking alongside them through their sporting trials and successes ([Clemens 2008](#)).

### 3. The ‘Great Sport Myth’

In 2015, Jay Coakley, one of the most prominent scholars in the sociology of sport, critiqued the well-established assumption of the inherent purity and goodness of sport. He called this the ‘Great Sport Myth’ ([Coakley 2015](#)) and identified that one of the consequences of this myth was that those

<sup>3</sup> For more on definitions of sports chaplaincy, see [Waller et al. \(2008, 2010\)](#).

<sup>4</sup> In accordance with the work of [Ryan \(2018\)](#), we use the term ‘pastoral care’ here to denote a theological (as opposed to ‘secular’) approach to chaplaincy, which is characterized by a witnessing of God’s love through service and servanthood. For broader discussion on the everyday work of sports chaplains and the constituent pastoral and theological elements of this role, see [Gamble et al. \(2013\)](#); [Kenney \(2016\)](#), [Parker et al. \(2016\)](#); [Roe and Parker \(2016\)](#); [Waller \(2016\)](#); [Waller and Cottom \(2016\)](#); and [Waller et al. \(2008, 2010, 2016\)](#).

who believe in it often struggle to take research into the sociology of sport seriously. He argued that a prevailing logic holds that there is no need to critique or analyse sport simply because, as a social institution, it functions and operates as it should—in a pure and moral way. By extension, this logic dictates that anyone who is suffering as a consequence of their involvement in sport must be the cause of their own circumstances rather than sport itself. Accordingly, one of the unwritten and normalised ‘truths’ which has emerged (and which persists) in sport, is that it is legitimate for an individual to over-conform to a performance/achievement-based identity in order to survive and succeed as an elite athlete.

This normalised truth has been described by some as a ‘pernicious’ and ‘damaging’ lie that determines an achievement-orientated mentality and which assaults the heart of sportspeople (Lipe 2013a, 2013b; White 2016). This is not a new concern. Cautionary tales regarding the development of this one-dimensional athletic identity have consistently emerged from within the realms of sports psychology (Adler and Adler 1989; Brewer et al. 1993), sports sociology (Hughes and Coakley 1991; Coakley 1992; McMahon et al. 2012; Sparkes 1998) and from sports theologians (Watson and White 2012). Overman (2009) noted that athletes develop an identity made up almost entirely from their involvement in sport. Indeed, the impression that Overman took from reading the life stories of hundreds of North American male professional athletes was that they ‘identify with their sport and their lives are defined by their sport’ (p. 61). Messner (1987) also identified that the longer athletes remained in a sport and the more proficient they became, the more likely they were to exclusively view and promote their identity as that of ‘athlete’. This process has been called ‘identity foreclosure’ (Brewer et al. 1993), and is discussed at length in the sports psychology literature as a problematic (perhaps even unavoidable) side-effect of the elite sporting experience—notably in relation to an athlete’s capacity to manage career transitions, including that of retirement (Fuller 2014). Moreover, it seems that elite athletes have a tendency to be rooted in the present (the ‘here and now’) and spend much of their time and energy concentrating on immediate events such as outputs and performance and, as a result, it is customary for them to focus almost exclusively on the sustenance and protection of their athletic identities (Adler and Adler 1989) at the expense of a more diverse and holistic life course narrative (Carless and Douglas 2009).

#### 4. ‘Sportianity’ and the Legitimisation of Performance-Based Identity

Contemporary sport has been described as the opposite of what God intended for our physical selves (Lee Sinden 2013) and has come under intense critique in terms of its moral standing (see, for example, Hoffman 2010; McNamee 2010; Watson 2012a, 2012b; Watson and Parker 2013a). Professional sport in particular is an environment that takes place against a neo-liberal backdrop that expects, demands and celebrates identity and bodily development and re-invention as an act of personal responsibility (Andrews et al. 2015). As a result, and perhaps unsurprisingly, Christian athletes have often reported experiencing a series of moral dilemmas associated with inhabiting the elite sporting world and living with the demands and expectations of its dominant value systems such as a ‘win at all costs’ mentality (see Stevenson 1997; Watson and White 2012; Watson and Parker 2013b). Despite these challenges, several evangelical organisations continue to flourish in the global sports arena, each with their own ‘stable’ of athletes/players who are encouraged to use their high-profile sporting status as a platform for proselytizing (see Hoffman 2010; Krattenmaker 2010; Parker and Watson 2015). Null (2008a) has warned that these organisations should be careful not to neglect the pastoral needs of their athletes, and to encourage athletes to not base their identities on evangelizing for Christ, but rather on what Christ has already done for them (Lee Sinden 2013). Yet, some of these organisations have been accused of ‘turning a blind eye’ to the contradictions inherent in elite competitive sport (Stevenson 2008; Hoffman 2010) and of harnessing Christian athletes as marketing tools for the promotion of certain denominations.

A concept that has emerged in the sport and spirituality literature as a critique of the conflation of the ideals of sport and evangelical Christianity is that of ‘sportianity’. This term was originally

promoted by Deford (1976) and has since become shorthand among sports scholars for the rise of evangelical sports ministries in the post-World War II era. Erdozian (2011, p. 20), for example, has described ‘sportianity’ as ‘the attempt to combine evangelism with the values of sport in ways that have arguably compromised both’. The critical discussion regarding the multifarious implications of evangelical sports ministries has been presented elsewhere (see, for example, Null 2008a). However, for the purposes of the present discussion, the key implication here is that, as a result of prevalent attitudes surrounding ‘sportianity’, an attractive identity management strategy has emerged, whereby a ‘performance based identity’ is adopted and legitimized by an athlete’s interpretation of their religious role and responsibility in society. This strategy circumvents the need to problematize the potentially heretical aspects of elite sport for Christian athletes, thereby allowing them to capitalise on their performance-based identities as ambassadors for Christ (see Krattenmaker 2010; Hoffman 2010; Feezell 2013; Parker and Watson 2015). We recognise that, given the kinds of lifestyle demands typically placed upon elite athletes, it may be something of a challenge for them to manage the conflicting values of their athletic identity and their faith (Stevenson 1997). In turn, we also recognise that the prevalence of attitudes surrounding ‘sportianity’ have cultivated a powerful and (to our minds) problematic contemporary discourse about how one might live out one’s faith as an elite athlete. What then, we might ask, are the deeper implications of this discourse on the lives of Christian athletes and how might we re-think the theological issues in play?

## 5. Recalibrating Christian Thinking on Elite Sport

In their review of systematic studies exploring the relationship between Christianity and sport, Watson and Parker (2014) highlight how a number of pioneering scholars in the sport/spirituality field have drawn attention to the way in which, over the last century, professional sport has become increasingly vulnerable to a growing commercialism (see Novak 1976/1994; Hoffman 2010; Higgs 1995). In charting the historical development of the relationship between sport and Christianity, Ladd and Mathisen (1999) highlight this tendency by indicating that during the 1950s, Christian organizations may have contributed to the exploitative propensity of professional sport, as newly formed Protestant evangelical sports ministries in the US began using the personal testimonies of well-known athletes to preach the Christian message to the masses. As this model began to spread, Ladd and Mathisen (1999) argue that this evangelistic approach became dominant in global sports ministry in the second half of the twentieth century.

Further light is shed on this inclination towards the extrinsic use of sport by Null (2004, 2008a, 2008b), in his theological approach to the challenges facing modern-day elite Christian athletes. Drawing on the seminal work of Niebuhr (1951) regarding the ways in which the Christian message has been understood and presented through a range of cultural perspectives, and writing from the perspective of a sports theologian and practicing sports chaplain (with experience of working with elite athletes and teams), Null (2008a) identifies the way in which Christianity has traditionally been represented and understood in sports culture, in turn, going on to present what might be considered a unique analysis of the praxis of churches and Christian sports organizations. It is in this process that Null discusses two conflicting theological ideas, suggesting that only one of these engenders an appropriate formation of personal identity in elite Christian athletes.

Null (2008a) argues that the faith of the Christian athlete is either predicated on being ‘driven’ or being ‘called’, and for him it is the latter which is the appropriate approach to solving the problem that humanity is innately rebellious against God, and under divine judgment (Null 2008a). The proposed resolution to this dilemma is key to determining a ‘driven’ or ‘called’ approach to the relationship between Christianity and elite sportspeople. A ‘driven’ approach is one whereby redemption can be ‘earned’ through personal effort or achievement. The antithesis, a ‘called’ approach, is that redemption is ‘received’ as a free gift as a result of the work of Christ by flawless life, sacrificial death and resurrection. Null (2004, 2008a, 2008b), sees these two approaches as mutually exclusive, and demands theological rigour in separating and clarifying them in relating Christianity to elite sport.



Null maintains that to be 'driven' is to fall into line with the typical and default perspective of elite sport, whereby personal worth is achieved as a result of sporting performance. This manifests itself in the tendency of elite Christian athletes to try to prove their personal value to God via sporting success. Null also maintains that this theologically inconsistent tendency needs to be challenged by advocating an alternative, 'called' relationship, with God, which is predicated on the belief that personal value is not found in one's sporting achievement, but in God's unconditional acceptance. Null's suggestion is that understanding and experiencing the unconditional nature of being 'called' is critical to developing and maintaining a healthy identity as a Christian athlete, since, as we have seen, the context of elite sport is one where, in the intensity of public competition, it is normative that personal worth is accredited solely by personal achievement. The result of this clarity around being 'called' is that the athlete obtains an assurance that, regardless of personal effort, success or failure, she or he is in a relationship with God based entirely on unconditional love and acceptance.

The institutional tendency of professional sport to determine personal value by way of performance remains unchallenged among athletes (Null 2008a), so long as those Christians who have any degree of influence in sporting contexts fail to clarify the critical contrast between being 'driven' and 'called'. For Null, failure to question these normative cultural assumptions is likely to lead to athletes being 'driven' to earn God's favour, in a similar manner to that in which they have imbibed the obligation to prove themselves of value to their coaches, fellow competitors and fans. In turn, failure to differentiate between 'driven' and 'called' identities may make it more difficult for an athlete to experience liberation from seeking personal worth through performance in the sporting arena, rather than in the unconditional, divine acceptance of God. This is a particular responsibility for those Christians influencing elite athletes (i.e., sports chaplains), since it is only through their capacity to grasp what it is to be 'called' that an elite athlete can experience the 'real joy' of this unique and truly unconditional relationship with God (Null 2004).

The failure to clearly refute the tendency of a 'driven' approach towards Christian athletes is identified by Null (2008a, 2008b) as a problematic aspect of both the Catholic and Protestant approaches to sport. The Catholic theologian Novak (1976/1994), for example, takes what initially appears to be an apposite approach to this issue, in proposing that for the Christian athlete there is more to sport than being victorious. However, in elaborating this stance, Novak exposes his own failure to escape the inclination towards a 'driven', performance-based mind-set. Whilst appropriately refuting the sole importance of winning, he replaces this with the task to perform in a sufficiently moral manner. The Christian athlete is to compete with an eye on their moral responsibility to play in a way that honours God, the creator of sporting gifts. Appropriate though this transcendent vision for the Christian athlete initially appears, Null (2008a) identifies the subtle ways in which it also falls prey to a 'driven' narrative in that it fails to appreciate the fundamental belief that humanity is incapable of offering anything meritorious to God. Positing a moral standard for competitive stance serves to promote a version of the traditional performance orientation of sports culture, that one's achievement, in this case moral behaviour, is meritorious and worthy of divine approval. In the context of elite sports culture, where the deeply embedded norm is that personal value is to be found in the quality of one's performance, any indication that sport can be used to exalt God is, for Null at least, a theological contradiction that adds an extra pressure and obligation to 'play the game' in such a way that God (as well as coaches, team mates, supporters and sponsors) will be pleased with one's efforts.

Having considered how the moral approach of Novak (1976/1994) risks reinforcing the prevalent 'driven' narrative of elite sport, Null (2008b) goes on to apply a similar theological critique to the efforts of some Protestant sports ministries in connecting Christianity and elite sport. Once again, due to the elementary failure to appreciate a sports culture in which athletic performance is a determinant of self-worth, Null argues that these ministries appear to place an additional demand on the already significant (emotional and physical) workload of the elite athlete. In this case, the requisite duty is that the athlete performs successfully enough on the field to earn the right to proclaim the Christian message to the masses—an added pressure to the heavy burden of satiating the expectations of coaches and

fans. The overarching logic here is that the Christian athlete requires a performance impressive enough to facilitate opportunities for post-match public evangelism if they are to serve God appropriately.

The position adopted by [Null \(2008a, 2008b\)](#) is that for the Christian elite athlete, these extra requirements, namely, moral duty in the Catholic context and evangelistic responsibility in the Protestant context, share the same ‘driven’ ethos. His critique is that both positions fail to question the inclination towards using sporting talents as instrumental means of earning God’s approval. For [Null \(2008a\)](#), it is theologically axiomatic that this premise be thoroughly rejected. An identity formed and maintained upon being ‘driven’, i.e., what we can earn from God, is the theological antithesis of being ‘called’, i.e., what God has freely given us. To this end, Null argues that critical to helping elite athletes understand the relationship between Christianity and sport is the premise that they are acceptable to (and accepted by) God through faith in Christ, and that such divine acceptance is entirely unrelated to sporting success or failure. In this view, it is only in the clarity of God’s free grace that athletes can gain and experience an identity congruous with this ‘calling’. In taking Null’s argument one step further, we contend that such a theological approach has scope not only to inform the everyday practice of sports chaplains in terms of their contribution to the emotional and spiritual wellbeing of the athletes with whom they work but also to assist Christian athletes themselves in negotiating and recalibrating the relationship between their faith and their athletic identity.

To summarise our discussion so far, we have suggested that Christian athletes should be actively encouraged, (or at the very least counselled), to discern the potential negative effects and dangers of developing an attachment to a performance-based identity informed and shaped by the normative values of sport ([White 2016](#)). Correspondingly, without such encouragement, an athlete’s performance-based identity may become ‘legitimately’ supplemented by their spiritual ‘endeavours’, rather than being problematized as a damaging drive for “approval or self-justification” ([White 2016](#)). It is against this backdrop of normalised adherence to problematic athletic identities that sports chaplains often conduct their mission. We are aware that the need for sports chaplains to unravel this grafting of ‘sportianity’ and performance-based identity on behalf of their athletes has been rehearsed elsewhere (see, for example, [Lipe 2013a, 2013b](#)). In spite of this, the most effective and appropriate ways and means through which this unravelling might occur have yet to emerge into an academic conversation/debate in scholarship surrounding the sport/Christianity dyad. Indeed, we believe that a deeper understanding of the relational dynamics of elite sport is necessary both for sports chaplains and for others who fulfil influential roles in the lives of elite athletes. Therefore, in what follows, we present a number of sociological concepts and ideas that may be helpful in allowing sports chaplains to better identify and understand some of the more subtle and normalised aspects of elite sport that sustain the discourses surrounding performance-based identity and, in turn, how these ideas might allow sports chaplains to equip Christian athletes to better negotiate and navigate the dilemmas and contradictions that these discourses present.

## 6. Towards a Sociology of Sport for Sports Chaplains

There has been a steady growth in the academic literature surrounding sport and religion over the past 30–40 years (see [Watson and Parker 2013a, 2014](#)) and despite the fact that some scholars have expressed concern about the limited extent to which this literature has engaged with sociological ideas (see [Gibbons et al. 2017](#); [Shilling and Mellor 2014](#)), there is evidence that this position is changing (see [Gibbons 2017](#); [Tyler and Gibbons 2019](#)). As [Markula and Silk \(2011\)](#) have explained, there is a wide range of sociological approaches to studying physical culture and importantly, not all of them share the same paradigmatic roots. For the purposes of the current discussion, in this section we consider the relevance of the three main frameworks that sociologists have adopted in their analyses of modern-day sport: the interpretivist perspective, the critical humanist perspective, and the post-structuralist perspective.

The interpretivist perspective assumes that “humans create knowledge through a subjective meaning making process” ([Markula and Silk 2011](#), p. 34) with scholars in this tradition focusing upon

participants' subjective experiences, and how, through these experiences, they attempt to interpret meaning in and through their daily existence. One conceptual example of the interpretive approach that has often been used in analyses of sporting contexts is Erving Goffman's (1959) seminal work entitled *Presentation of self in everyday life*. In this foundational text concerning social interaction, Goffman utilises a metaphor based on theatrical representation to articulate his perceptions of how face-to-face encounters unfold. Goffman considers everyday life as akin to the performance of a play on a stage with individuals as actors presenting favourable self-impressions to an audience. While in the presence of others, individuals engage in what Goffman calls 'dramatic realisation', where the performances that they present when 'front of stage' are idealised and designed to integrate and facilitate a harmonious and successful existence within a culture's norms and values. Within Goffman's (1959) thinking, the expectations of audiences and different social environments also influence an individual's presentation of their own appropriate self. Goffman's 'dramaturgical sociology' highlights the importance of everyday lives wherein through 'strategic interaction', individuals construct meaning (Birrell and Donnelly 2004; Markula and Silk 2011). In turn, Goffman's work has been adopted in discussions of how coaches strategically 'maintain face' within sports cultures (Jones 2006), how coaches behave during games (Partington and Cushion 2012), and how elite athletes proactively attempt to manage their identity during periods of career transition (Hickey and Roderick 2017).<sup>5</sup>

A mainstay for researchers working from a critical humanist perspective is to 'locate individual actions within the relations of dominance and subordination that, according to them, characterise the world we live in' (Markula and Silk 2011, p. 39). In line with their internalisation of this logic, critical humanist researchers in the sociology of sport assume that unequal power relations exist in society and that these relations serve to shape and dominate peoples' lives. One of the key theorists in this field is Antonio Gramsci who is perhaps best known for his concept of 'hegemony'. In brief, Gramsci defined hegemony as the way in which, at a societal and institutional level, the 'ruling' (or dominant) classes establish and maintain control over subordinate (social class) groups (Gramsci 1971). Central to this concept is the notion that in any social situation, individuals (humans/social actors) possess a degree of 'agency' which equates to the ability to resist dominant ideas and ideologies. Gramsci's work has been used extensively in critical analyses of sporting institutions, most notably in the way that sport and recreational activities were 'rationalised' by the ruling elite in Victorian Britain in order to control the pastimes of the working classes (see Hargreaves 1986; Erdozian 2011; Parker and Weir 2012).

Similar to the interpretive paradigm, poststructuralists observe multiple meanings on the part of the everyday experiences and realities of social actors. Unlike interpretive research, however, these multiple interactions of reality become valuable only when reflected against the social and historical context of knowledge-making (see Avner et al. 2014; Markula et al. 2001). One post-structuralist theorist who has been appropriated at length in the realm of sports sociology is French social historian and philosopher Michel Foucault (see, for example, Heikkala 1993; Markula and Pringle 2006; Shogan 1999; Manley et al. 2016). Foucault's work (and in particular his concepts of discipline, 'panopticism', and surveillance) have been routinely used as a toolkit from which sports sociologists have borrowed in order to attempt to understand and articulate how 'people are classified, disciplined and normalised by social processes that they have little direct control over' (Markula and Pringle 2006, p. 24). For example, Foucault's (1991) thesis around the way in which 'disciplinary practices ... normalise individuals into useful, docile bodies' (p. 73) has been taken up by a range of scholars investigating sports coaching (Denison 2007; Denison et al. 2013, 2017; Denison and Mills 2014; Mills and Denison 2013, 2018; Mills et al. 2020), strength and conditioning practices in sport (Gearity and Mills 2012), the implications of surveillance and wearable technologies in sport (Jones and Denison 2018; Jones 2019), as well as retirement from professional sport (Jones and Denison 2017). Lee Sinden (2013) has gone so far as to

<sup>5</sup> Goffman's later work has also been appropriated for developing critical understandings of sport. Parker and Manley (2016, 2017), for example, have deployed Goffman's (1961) ideas on 'asylums' as a conceptual backdrop for analysing professional footballing apprenticeship.



connect Foucault's 'means of correct training' (a component of his disciplinary analysis) to support her observations regarding the challenges associated with accepting the problematic normative values of her own sport (elite rowing) alongside her Christian faith, a process she calls negotiating the 'normalisation of emotion'.

More precisely, Foucault's disciplinary analysis and the details regarding his notion of 'docility' has helped these authors to better reveal how docile bodies are created in sports contexts. Foucault's work has also helped scholars understand how bodies become 'manipulable' as effective locations for the imposition of discipline that presides as a consequence of the unproblematised, limiting arrangements of elite sport. In particular, this body of work has collectively identified how entrenched coaching practices derived from the unquestioned 'disciplinary logic of sport' (Denison et al. 2017) often lead to the "production of docile bodies reliant on being led or developed according to a set norm" (Gearity and Mills 2012, p. 132) from the dominant bioscientific articulation of the athletic body common to sport (Mills et al. 2020). These 'set norms' are reinforced by the routine objectification of the body, these days typically through data generated by surveillance technologies designed to track and regulate the athletes (Jones and Toner 2016). The work of Foucault has also been helpful in developing understandings of how, as a result of belonging to sports contexts defined by the imposition of disciplinary mechanisms, individual athletes may become heavily reliant upon this ubiquitous imposition of disciplinary power in order to make sense of their daily existence. As a consequence, these same athletes may then struggle to adapt to new social arrangements and contexts typified by alternative relations of power, for example as they transition into retirement from sport (Jones and Denison 2017).

Given the above foray into some of the theoretical and conceptual perspectives utilised by sociologists of sport, what, we might ask, are the implications of these kinds of ideas for sports chaplains and their broader networks? First, we are firm in the belief that sports chaplains should be aware that there are a variety of ways of thinking about sport and its underlying dynamics. Moreover, we believe that those who are invested in the training and education of sports chaplains should be encouraged to consider the potential advantages of integrating socio-cultural analyses into their various endeavors. Second, we also believe that, through an exposure to socio-cultural thinking, practicing sports chaplains might develop wider interpretations, not only of sport per se, but of the lives of the athletes with whom they work, thereby becoming better placed to assist in relation to issues of emotional and spiritual wellbeing. Given the strength of the great sport myth (Coakley 2015), it is common for athletes to accept the 'disciplinary logic' that underpins contemporary sport (Denison et al. 2017) and to read any failure to meet the 'normalised' expectations inherent therein (such as their commission to 'thrive', or to be 'mentally tough enough') as a deficit or failure on their part. In short, our position is that if sports chaplains are able to counter this dynamic, then they are also in a position to help athletes better understand and map these 'discursive' interactions (perhaps as a result of familiarity with the frameworks and concepts which we have outlined above), and therefore adopt a much more informed standpoint from which to provide balanced guidance and ministry.

We acknowledge that the nihilistic ontology that underpins some of the sociological concepts that we have presented here (for example, those of post-structuralism), may be seen by some as incongruent with traditional theological thinking. However, we are confident in our belief that such thought processes are valuable (see, for example, Caputo 1997) and should not be dismissed on this basis, especially given their track record of illuminating the problematic nature of elite sport in terms of its underlying assumptions, power structures, and relational dynamics. Sports chaplains will rightly turn to the Gospel as the means by which a troubled athlete may arrest the idolatry of a performance-based identity. However, we argue that it is hasty to reject the potentiality of, for example: (i) interpretive research that explains how athletes might understand how they have developed their identities and meaning-making processes, as well as how they and their peers manage their 'selves' as they navigate their sporting exploits; (ii) critical humanist research to explain how and why athletes may feel marginalised by ideological imbalances in society; or (iii) poststructuralist research which

highlights discourses of sport that promote and normalise athlete docility—including the acceptance of the damaging celebration of a performance-based identity derived from a misinformed, heretical sportianity context. It is our view that armed with this wider theoretical and conceptual vocabulary, the sports chaplain is better equipped to interpret the everyday experiences of the elite athlete and, therefore, to provide a greater level of pastoral and spiritual care and support.

## 7. Conclusions

Our aim within this paper has been to enhance the theoretical and conceptual profile of sports chaplaincy by arguing that, in addition to pastoral and spiritual care, sports chaplains might seek to develop a broader theological and theoretical outlook on sporting practices and behaviours in the hope of better serving the wellbeing needs of their athletes. Such arguments not only expand the academic literature on sports chaplaincy but also provide an additional set of lenses through which sports chaplains might construct more sophisticated interpretations and analyses of elite sport.

To do this we have built upon previous academic work to call for the critical interrogation and disruption of long-standing attitudes, assumptions and behaviours in sport around performance-based identity and the negative impact that this might have on Christian athletes. In turn, we have suggested that there is a need to challenge and recalibrate theological thinking around elite athlete identities. We have argued this because we believe that the prevalent discourse that frames athletes' negotiation of their faith within elite sports limits chaplains in their efforts to support the holistic wellbeing needs of their athletes. We also believe that this discourse is limited because the currently prescribed management strategies for Christian athletes are heavily influenced by a theology that falls victim to the damaging influence of attitudes legitimized by overly simplistic and problematic evangelical interpretations of Christianity that have been appropriated in the current neo-liberal context (i.e., sportianity). Moreover, we are concerned that this has the effect of limiting the socio-spiritual growth of elite athletes by presenting them with a binary choice where they must either: (i) re-double their efforts to graft their Christian identity onto their performance-based identity or (ii) abandon elite sports altogether because they feel it is not compatible with their faith as prescribed by contemporary discourses of faith and sport.

We have used the seminal work of key scholars to underpin our arguments in terms of the way in which broader socio-cultural analyses of sport might be facilitated. Such analyses can be applied to the needs of individuals irrespective of faith commitment or belief, intentionally promoting a redemptive message to those who frequent elite sporting organizations. Using previous academic research to develop and frame our ideas, we have suggested that, like other forms of chaplaincy, the role of the sports chaplain is agentic in nature. For those chaplains who serve in elite sports settings, chaplaincy takes place in an environment that often gains significant exposure and recognition across the broader social landscape. Yet, like those in other sectors and communities, the people of sport are in need of revelation in and through a relationship based not on their performance or ability, but on who they are in Christ, and we believe that this is just one of the many tasks to which sports chaplains are called.

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