

## Beyond Tebowing and superstitions: religious practices of 15-year-old competitive athletes

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### ABSTRACT

Research of religious practices in sport typically limits investigation to Christian prayer and/or "superstitions" among professional or collegiate athletes. This study moves in a different direction by examining the religious spiritual practices reported by 13 adolescent competitive athletes in individual interviews and focus groups. With a mix of religious backgrounds among the 15-year-old participants, this sample of males and females reported religious practices such as talking with dead ancestors and different forms of prayer and meditation. The paper categorises these and other practices according to Nancy Tatom Ammerman's 2014 study, enabling a conceptualisation of how adolescent athletes use religious practices in everyday ways to enable confidence in their play. The study overall points to a significant religious element within competitive youth sports that challenges cynical assumptions about elite athletes' use of religion found in other studies.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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### 1. Introduction

The relationship between sport and religion has been, until recently, a critically unexplored area of investigation for social scientists (Hoffman 2010; Watson and Parker 2013). Beyond typical discussions that focus on Christian athletes' use of prayers – exemplified in the elite American football player Tim Tebow – current researchers provide overviews of the ways sport and religion converge, demonstrating a growing trend of interest in sport-related study. For example, Cipriani (2012) compares the sports calendar of events to religious (liturgical) calendars, and Bain-Selbo (2009) examines ritual chants, behaviours and gestures among collegiate football spectators. For millions of devoted fans, argues Ward (2013), sport acts as a 'secular religion ... providing meaning, identity and the experience of transcendence' (224) that religious institutions no longer viably offer. Scholes and Sassower (2014), making a more modest claim, state that sports often displace the exclusive centrality of religious institutions by transmitting cultural meanings more relevantly than religion currently does. This occurrence in the sporting world is part of a larger phenomenon. Huss (2014, 56) explains that the categorical distinction between the secular (i.e., sports) and the religious has become less

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